

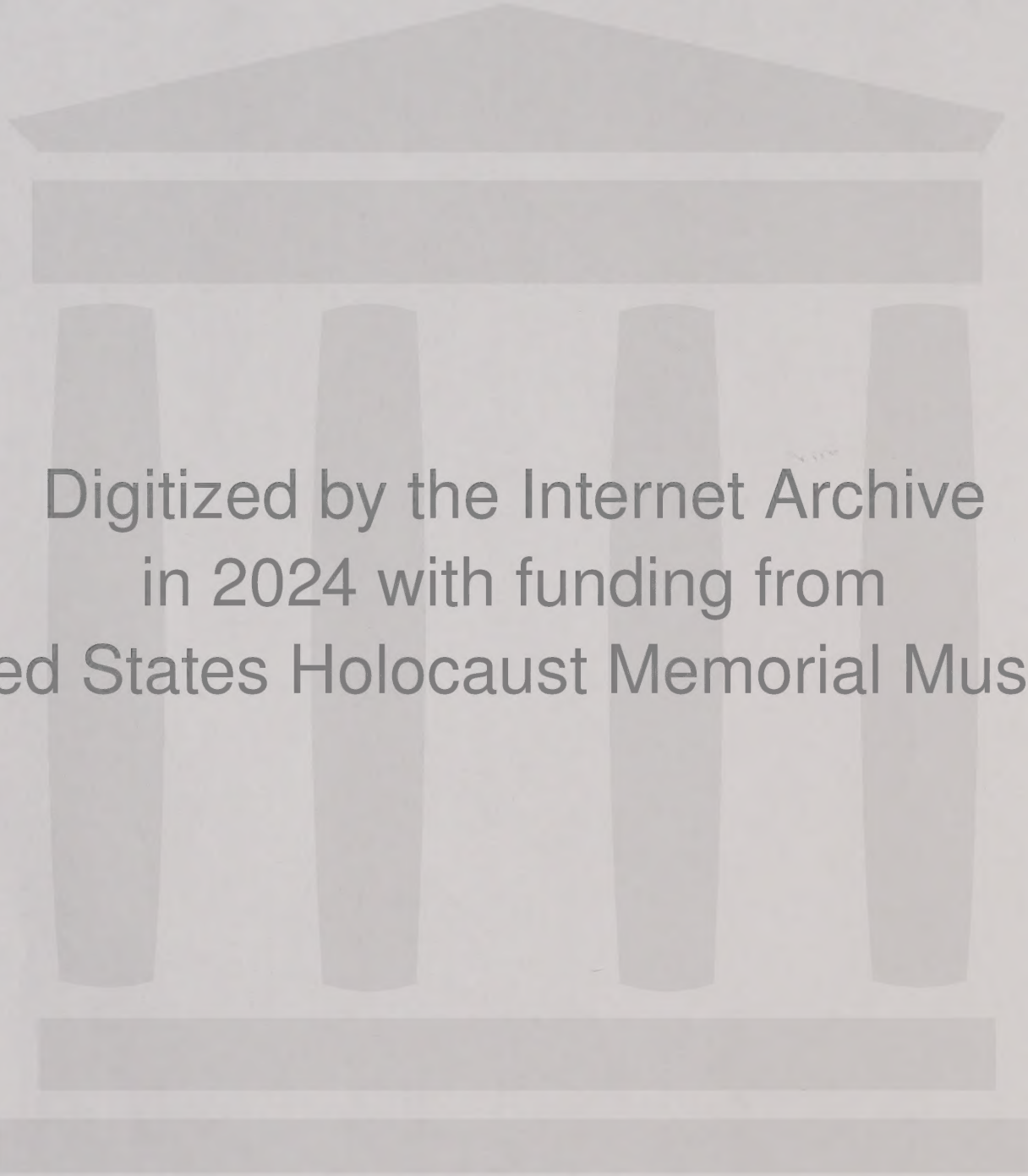


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Felicja Karay

ROCKETS AND RHYMES

The Hasag-Leipzig Women Labor Camp

Translated from the Hebrew by

Sara Kitai

ROCKETS AND RHYMES

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With them, and thanks to them,

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ABBREVIATIONS

AGK Archiwum Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Warszawa - Archive of the Central Commission for Research of Crimes Against the Polish Nation-National Memorial Institute-Warsaw

Anklageschrift (Kamienna Prozess) - indictment (Kamienna Trial)

APMM Archiwum Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku- Archive of the National Museum at Majdanek

BA Bundesarchiv Koblenz

BGKBZHwP Biuletyn GKBZHwP - Bulletin of Main Commission for Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland

DAW Deutsche Ausruestungswerke - German Equipment Works, a WVHA enterprise

Doc. occup. Documenta occupationis teutonicae

Erntefest Campaign 4-8 November 1943 in which 42,000 Jews in three camps , Majdanek, Poniatowa and Trawniki , were slaughtered by special SS units.

GG Generalgouvernement

HSSuPF Hoehrer SS und Polizeifuehrer - Higher SS and Police Leader

ITS International Tracing Service, Arolsen

NMG Archiv der Mahn und Gedenkstätte Buchenwald- Archive of the Buchenwald and Commemoration Site

Nur. doc. Nuremberg documents

Odezwa proclamation

Oświadczenie declaration

RmfrUK Reichsminister fuer Rüstung und Kriegsproduktion – Ministry of Armaments and War Production

RSHA Reichssicherheitshauptamt - Reich Main Security Office

Rue-Betrieb Rüstungsbetrieb - Munitions Plant

...I can not now remember when, where or from whom I heard this story:

"It happened one night in Auschwitz, when we were lying exhausted on our bunks, totally drained, barely alive. Suddenly we heard singing. It was Sala, a Jew from Vienna, as emaciated and ashen as the rest of us. But when she opened her mouth to sing, out came a Schubert serenade. Sala's extraordinary soprano filled the miserable barracks, the: beautiful melody transporting us to another world, far away, whose existence we had long ago forgotten... We were so intent on the music, that not one of us gave a thought to the SS officer who had quietly entered the barracks. He stood by the door with an expression of amazement on his face, listening... We didn't have time to warn Sala. All of a sudden, as if awakening from a dream, he strode over to Sala's bunk, pulled her down to the floor, and began beating her, shouting: "Du verfluchte Jüdin! - You damnable Jew, you don't have the right to sing that song!"

INTRODUCTION

I wrote this journal on factory work sheets using a pencil I stole from the foreman. I wrote on Sundays when we had a day off, at night, in the corner under the light on my breaks during the night shift at the plant, in the bunker during an air raid, wanting, hoping to be able to hold onto it, to hand it over to those who would live to witness the defeat of Hitler. To the prisoners of the camps at Bergen-Belsen, Ravensbrück, Gross Rosen, Stutthof, Mauthausen, what we underwent may not seem so horrible. They were in the death camps, unashamedly named Vernichtungslager - extermination camps.

Our concentration camp was actually a labor camp. We were needed to work in the munitions plant, one of the largest in Germany, and we came into contact with the civilian population, so it was necessary to maintain a veneer of humane treatment. And yet the terror was still there. There were hundreds of camps just like it attached to factories and mines throughout wartime Germany. They must never be forgotten either.

These words were written by Felicja Bannet Schäftler, a prisoner of the Hasag camp at Leipzig-Schönefeld in Germany. It was a multi-national women's camp, an "outside squad" (*Außenkommando*) of Buchenwald, one of seven attached to the munitions plants owned by Hugo Schneider Aktiengesellschaft - Hasag-Leipzig. The same concern also maintained six Jewish forced labor camps in the *General-gouvernement* (GG). To date, a study of only one of these, Skarżysko-Kamienna, has been published.¹ It was dismantled in the Summer of 1944 and the inmates transferred to other Hasag camps. The present study focuses on the fate of 1,200 Jewish women transported from Skarżysko-Kamienna to Hasag-Leipzig.

¹ Felicja Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow - Skarżysko-Kamienna Slave Labor Camp*, Amsterdam, 1996 (herewith: *Death Comes in Yellow*).

prisoners alone, maintained 27 auxiliary camps for women. As of today, only one of these has been investigated.³ The history of the others remains totally unknown. Interest in these camps has been growing of late, and this book represents the first attempt to investigate the subject.

The first two chapters of this book thus serve as the background for the main section devoted to a description of the internal life of the Leipzig camp. Chapters Three to Eight paint a broad picture of the diverse prisoner population composed of some 18 national groups, with the Jewish women constituting one of the largest. The multi-national nature of the camp makes it possible to consider relations on several levels: between the German staff and the prisoners in the factory; between the internal administration of the camp and the rank-and-file inmates; and between the various national groups. Special attention is paid the issue of the attitude toward the Jews on all levels, and the question of whether it changed in any way in response to developments in the world political situation

There is, in addition, the basic question of whether Hasag-Leipzig, like all Nazi camps, was designed to serve as a "laboratory" in which the German authorities conducted experiments on the bodies and minds of the prisoners under conditions of extreme terror. In order to survive, every individual, man or woman, who was thrust into this world was made to discard the accepted values of normal society and adjust to a new reality. Under such circumstances, did they have any chance of preserving their inner spirit and upholding basic moral, social and national values, even if only to the most minor degree?

In an attempt to address this issue, a description of social and cultural life in the camp is offered here, with emphasis on the Jewish prisoners. Along with the facts, their interpretation, and scenes of daily life, the book contains numerous poems written in the camp. In contrast to conventional practice in similar studies, here they do not appear in a separate chapter on cultural life,⁴ but constitute an integral part of various chapters.

³ Dieter Vaupel, *Das Aussenkommando Hess. Lichtenau des Konzentrationslager Buchenwald 1944/45*, Kassel, 1984, p. 75 (herewith: D. Vaupel, *Das Aussenkommando*).

⁴ Cf.: "Cultural Activity and Spiritual Life in the Camp," Bella Guterman, *Toasting Life with Death: The Story of the Janowska Camp in Lvov*, (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1993, 135-146.

impossible for me to view certain documents, such as those in the ITS archives in Arolsen.

References to Hasag employees and the functionaries of the internal administration of the camp were found in trial transcripts. Material concerning Hasag's policy toward slave laborers was derived from the management's directives.

The description of the internal life of the Leipzig inmates and their work conditions in the factory rely on extant writings of the prisoners themselves, including:

1. sources written in the camp, among them:
 - a. journals, the most important being that of Felicja Bannet Schäftler;
 - b. literary poems and prose excerpts;
 - c. incidental verses and couplets;
 - d. writings for the stage (sketches, plays, and other "recital pieces");
2. later sources:
 - a. the testimony of former prisoners written after liberation;
 - b. the testimony of former prisoners, both Jewish and Polish, obtained by request of the author;
 - c. oral interviews;
 - d. autobiographical memoirs published after the war by former Jewish, Russian, Polish and French prisoners. Unfortunately, I was unable to establish contact with former prisoners of other nationalities.

Every historian must deal with the problem of the relative credibility of testimony in regard to a variety of facts and figures, such as names, dates, and numbers. Existing German documents make it possible to correct certain inaccuracies (for example, all testimonies report the size of the prisoner population to be larger than the actual camp figures). In other cases, the consistency of information over a number of testimonies served as evidence of its validity.

There was also a subjective motivation for my decision to undertake this study: I too was a prisoner at Leipzig. It has been claimed that research by Holocaust survivors is problematic, incurring the risk that the authors may lose sight of the borders between personal experience and objective scientific observation. I can only repeat the words of

CAPTER ONE

THE MASTERS

I. Hasag & Co. - The Face Behind the Mask

October, 1943 marked a turning point in the war: fighting ceased in the main arena - on the Eastern front. According to the German press, it was the brilliant strategy of the Wehrmacht that brought this about. In Italy, the Allies advanced northward at a snail's pace, and the bombing of German towns eased off. Yet despite the lull, all of Europe was tensely waiting for the results of the Allied conference set for mid-October. Each party was pinning its hopes on the outcome. The Germans hoped for a worsening of relations among the Allies, quoting the British *Observer* that had warned against the far-reaching territorial demands of Soviet Russia. The occupied countries were desperately waiting for the opening of a second front, with the word "October" appearing overnight in huge letters on the walls of Warsaw as a warning to their occupiers.¹

The change came on October 8th. Contrary to expectations, Radio Moscow reported that the Red Army had launched a new offensive along the Dnieper River. The following day, there were again massive air attacks on Northern Germany. But still there was no second front. The battle slipped back into its former routine, and October 1943 became the month of unfulfilled hopes.

In South-East Germany people still entertained the delusion that they were immune from heavy Allied bombing. In Leipzig, the capital of Saxony, life seemed to be going on as ever. With a sense of "business as usual," the Hasag Concern shareholders gathered on October 11 at company headquarters on Hugo Schneider St. for a general meeting convened to approve the firm's financial statement of 1942.

¹ Ludwik Landau, *Kronika lat wojny i okupacji*, Warszawa, 1963, vol III, pp. 292-295 (herewith: *Kronika*).

the German mark and resulting deflation, a large number of firms were forced into bankruptcy. Hasag's habitually cautious financial policy, however, enabled it to amass capital which it could then use to buy out companies that had collapsed. Thus, for example, Hasag acquired all the stock in Otto Müller AG of Berlin, which was merged with the parent company in 1931.

Since there were not yet any signs of an end to the economic crisis, on 4 July 1932 a general meeting of Hasag shareholders decided to take steps to recoup the losses incurred by the drop in the value of the firm's assets. As a result, together with the liquidation of a 587,000 mark reserve fund, the founder capital of the company was depreciated by a ratio of 10:7, from 6 million marks to 4,200,00, effective retroactively from the 1931 balance sheet. All this was done with one goal in mind, to preserve the integrity and financial security of the company in face of future political developments, still shrouded in mist.

The year 1932 marked a momentous change in the history of Hasag when, at the recommendation the engineer Dr. Richard Koch, a member of the board of directors, Paul Budin, an SS functionary from Berlin, was appointed to the post of general manager. Without a doubt, Budin, born in 1892, must have been experienced in financial management, since at this point in time his SS connections alone would not have carried enough weight to earn him such a responsible position in this distinguished and well-established firm. The new manager deftly planned his strategy to adapt to the changes in the political constellation. When Hitler rose to power, the Hasag plants were converted in part to the production of munitions and other military materiel, and at the same time, its connections with the army's Armaments Office were tightened. In 1939, the Hasag Metalworks (*Hasag Metallwerke G.m.b.H. Leipzig*) were founded, and in 1940 merged with the parent company, Hugo Schneider AG (see the factory card, fig. 1.). The war spurred the rapid development of Hasag, which, by the late '30s, had become virtually a munitions plant (*Rüstungsbetrieb*) specializing in a variety of armaments, from bullets for infantry rifles to rocket shells for combat planes. By the end of 1939, the concern could boast ten plants:⁵

1. Werk Leipzig-Paunsdorf
2. Werk Berlin-Köpenick

⁵ "Besitz-und Betriebsbeschreibung," *Handbuch*, *ibid.*, p. 5260.

Hasag-Leipzig (DM 12,600,000), we may get some idea of the size of Hasag's share of the war booty (*Kriegsbeute*) from the *Generalgouvernement* (G.G.).

The secret of the new company's success lay in the fact that Hasag had managed to secure a monopoly in the munitions industry in the G.G. In January, 1943, Budin concluded negotiations with Hans Frank's administration for the purchase, at the ludicrous price of 16.5 millions zloty, of three factories: a foundry at Raków, an ammunitions plant at Skarżysko-Kamienna, and a grenade factory at Kielce. Three additional plants under the commissarial management (*Kommissarische Verwaltung*) of Hasag were added at Częstochowa.⁷ The millions the company invested in this transaction paid off handsomely when each of the six factories set up Jewish forced labor camps in 1942-43. The free labor of 15,000 inmates contributed considerably to the blossoming of the firm in the G.G.

There can be no doubt that profits from the Hasag factories in Poland were channeled back to the company's coffers in Leipzig. At the trial of Hasag's German foremen in 1948, Gustav Hessen, an executive of the firm, testified that the shares of the new company in the G.G. were divided up between Paul Budin and the Hasag-Leipzig concern. Hessen denied the accusations of inhuman living conditions for the Jewish prisoners by claiming that back in Leipzig they knew nothing of what was going on in the camps in the *Generalgouvernement*.⁸

This claim is totally indefensible: thousands of threads, both overt and covert, tied the Hasag factories in occupied Poland to the head office in Leipzig. As early as 4 June 1940, Egon Dalski, the manager of the Hasag-Skarżysko plants, appears on the commercial register (*Handelsregister*) as an authorized agent (*Procurist*) of Hasag-Leipzig. His power of attorney is recorded as being revoked in November, 1943.⁹ What is not recorded are the reasons for his dismissal: the theft of Jewish property in the

⁷ Hasag, *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Tel Aviv-New York, 1990, p. 647 (herewith: *Encyclopedia*).

⁸ Testimony of Gustav Hessen, Kamienna Trial, *Sitzungen*, Yad Va'Shem Archives, Jerusalem (YV), TR 10-7, p. 21.

⁹ Hasag, *Handelsregister, Registerakten*, StAL, 118 HRB-169.

Shareholders of Hasag-Leipzig

Shareholder	Agent	Share Capital	%
Direktor Curt Pretsch, Leipzig		1,866,500	14.8
Allgemeine Deutsche Credit-Anstalt, Leipzig	Curt Pretsch	900,500	7.1
Georg Hauck & Sohn, Frankfurt/M	Curt Pretsch	25,000	0.2
Bayr. Hypothek. u. Wechsel Bank, Nürnberg	Curt Pretsch	800	
Bayr. Hypothek. u. Wechsel Bank, München	Curt Pretsch	1,800	
Sächsische Bank, Filiale Leipzig	Curt Pretsch	8,100	
Paul Schauseil & Co, Halle	Curt Pretsch	20,000	0.2
Paul Schauseil & Co, Eilenburg	Curt Pretsch	900	
Meyer & Co, Leipzig	Curt Pretsch	20,000	0.2
Reichs-Kredit-Gesellschaft A.G. Berlin	Curt Pretsch	22,000	0.2
Sächsische Bank in Dresden	Curt Pretsch	15,000	0.1
		2,660,700	22.9
Deutsche Bank, Filiale Leipzig	Eduard Pendorf	620,000	4.9
Mendelssohn & Co, Berlin	Eduard Pendorf	3,000	
Creditanstalt-Bankverein, Wien	Eduard Pendorf	60,000	0.5
Wernigeroder Bank, Wernigerode	Eduard Pendorf	2,000	
L. Wolfrum & Co, Aussig	Eduard Pendorf	2,100	
Niederlausitzer Bank A.G., Cottbus	Eduard Pendorf	3,000	
Meklenburger Depositen u. Wechsel Bank	Eduard Pendorf	8,300	0.1
		698,400	5.5
Commerzbank in Leipzig, Leipzig	Karl Geithe	271,100	2.1
Prokurist Georg Kaiser, Leipzig		3,208,600	25.5
Dresdner Bank in Leipzig, Leipzig	Georg Kaiser	2,194,500	17.4
Dresdner Bank in Leipzig, Leipzig	Georg Kaiser	727,900	5.8
Dresdner Bank in Leipzig, Leipzig	Georg Kaiser	1,700	
Dresdner Bank in Leipzig, Leipzig	Georg Kaiser	26,400	0.2
Dresdner Bank in Leipzig, Leipzig	Georg Kaiser	11,000	0.1
Bayrische Staatsbank, München	Georg Kaiser	12,000	0.1
Bayrische Vereinsbank, München	Georg Kaiser	1,000	
Ostbank A.G. Posen	Georg Kaiser	5,000	
Länderbank Wien A.G., Wien	Georg Kaiser	24,000	0.2
B.Metzler s. Sohn & Co, Frankfurt/M	Georg Kaiser	25,000	0.2
Karl Dannecker, Leipzig	Georg Kaiser	900	
		6,238,000	49.5
Shareholders not represented at meeting		2,511,800	20.0
Total		12,600,00	100.0

The occupation of Poland offered the Dresdner Bank a broad arena for its activities, and along with the Reichsbank and the Deutsche Bank, it became one of the financial institutions most active in the take-over of Jewish property and the Polish economy. Several Polish banks fell into its hands, and it established its own branch in Krakow and other cities under the name Kommerzialbank. Agents of the Dresdner Bank also sat on the board of directors of Berghütte, a huge concern combining the coal mines and iron industry of Silesia in southern Poland.¹⁴ The Dresdner Bank gained widest renown, however, as the "SS-Bank," a title it earned as the favored institution of senior SS officers for the handling of their own accounts.¹⁵

Neither the SS-Bank's control of Hasag nor the fact that Budin himself was a high-placed functionary of the SS are sufficient proof that the concern was run at the dictates of the SS. In point of fact, Hasag remained a private enterprise whose policy was set in accord with the demands of a capitalist economy. Indeed, in the Autumn of 1943, the Nazi authorities and the shareholders began to go their separate ways, with the members of the financial world preferring to ensure their own future. In his chronicles, the economist Ludwik Landau wrote on 9 October 1943 that in defiance of all logic, there had been an astonishing rise in the stock prices of German industries, indicating that the buyers were divesting themselves of government bonds. The officials of the Nazi regime were well aware of the banks' hold on the German economy. In October, the economic minister issued a directive to public companies demanding that they reduce the size of their boards of directors by removing agents of the banks!¹⁶ The degree to which this directive was obeyed can be seen by comparing the list of members of the Hasag board in 1942 and in 1945: it appears that two more bank managers had been added.¹⁷

Another interesting fact about the post-war history of the Dresdner Bank can be found in an article published on 26 January 1955 in the Polish paper *Trybuna Ludu*:

¹⁴ Czesław Madajczyk, *Polityka III Rzeszy w okupowanej Polsce*, Warszawa, 1970, t. I, pp. 61, 522, 523.

¹⁵ Marian Podkowiński, "Nie tylko Schacht," *Trybuna Ludu*, 26 Jan. 1955.

¹⁶ L. Landau, *Kronika*, pp. 300, 346.

¹⁷ See note 10, *ibid.*

materials and forced laborers from Eastern Europe, as well as the disruption of the transportation system resulting from the bombings, made it impossible to fulfill all three demands. In order to remain in the game and exploit national resources up to the very last minute, the firms could no longer plan production systematically, but were compelled to rely on their own resourcefulness and ad hoc solutions to all problems, including the procurement of new workers.

It should be remembered that the number of civilian workers in Germany, some 36 million, remained stable throughout the years of the war. The largest numbers were recorded in 1943 both for the Wehrmacht (9.6 million) and for the labor market (36.5 million). Despite the recruitment of workers for agriculture, these numbers did not drop in 1944, because thousands of people were sent back to the Reich as the Germans withdrew from occupied areas, forced back by the advance of the Soviet army. Although the flow of forced laborers dwindled, in the Summer of 1944 they still constituted about one-fifth of the total work force in Germany,²¹ and the general atmosphere of "catch as catch can" applied to manpower as well.

Neither were the SS authorities, led by the WVHA (SS Central Economic and Administrative Office) willing to forego the opportunities presented by the war. The "slave trade" at Buchenwald may serve as an example. According to the Polish researcher Z. Zonik, from the Autumn of 1944 and until the liberation of the camp, there were irregularities in the lists of prisoners. Nevertheless, the record that does exist presents an intriguing picture: At the end of 1944, at least 86 *Aussenkommando's* were at work in a number of factories owned by private industrialists. In January, 1945, these squads comprised a total of around 105,000 prisoners, both men and women. In March, 1945, there were 107 *Aussenkommando's* a number that had grown to 138²² by the end of the war (see the map fig. 3.).

How is it that up to the very last moment, the factory owners were so eager for workers from among the concentration camp inmates, putting millions of legitimate, and

²¹ Jürgen Kuczynski, *Die Geschichte der Lage der Arbeiter unter dem Kapitalismus*, Berlin, 1964, pp. 282-284.

²² Waław Czarnecki, Zygmunt Zonik, *Walczący obóz Buchenwald*, Warszawa, 1969, pp. 148, 490-498 (herewith: Z. Zonik).

1. procuring forced laborers from European countries;
2. transferring Jews from the Hasag camps in the G.G. to the firm's factories in the Reich;
3. procuring prisoners from concentration camps in Germany;
4. setting up new labor camps beside the Hasag plants in Germany.

Up until now, Budin had managed to adapt of his labor force to suit production needs. Between 1941 and 1943, he transferred Polish workers from Hasag plants in the G.G. to Germany, and wrangled groups of forced laborers from other countries, including Croatia.²⁶ In 1944, competition between the private sector and the WVHA, which employed camp inmates in its own factories, became sharper. As a result, in the Spring of 1944, more foreign workers found themselves seized by the Gestapo and sent to concentration camps. Speer complained to Hitler that 30,000-40,000 employees were being arrested each month, and "it's impossible to work like this!"²⁷

Hasag was also hurt by the battle over labor. SS-Hauptsturmführer Albert Schwartz, in charge of work assignment in Buchenwald, testified that a transport of Poles from Łódź meant for Hasag was mistakenly directed to Buchenwald. Although the camp commanders knew these people were not prisoners, instead of being released they were, by order of the WVHA, reclassified as prisoners and constituted as an ordinary *Aussenkommando*.²⁸ Such incidents made it abundantly clear to Budin that he could not rely on a regular supply of forced laborers.

As we have seen, Hasag was holding 15,000 Jews in the G.G. as an emergency reserve. However, years of experience in camp administration, and particularly the lessons he learned from the *Erntefest* in 1943, had taught Budin that the fate of the Jews was never certain.²⁹ It must be remembered that the razing of the ghetto in Łódź began in June, 1944, in the midst of the death march of Hungarian Jews to the ovens of Auschwitz. In addition, in view of the Russian advance, the Sipo and SD Commander in

²⁶ Letter from P. Beisegal to Paul Budin from 19 September 1941, *Anatomie des Krieges*, p. 354. See: *Death Comes in Yellow*, p. 29

²⁷ Albert Speer, *Der Sklavenstaat*, Stuttgart, 1981, pp. 79-80.

²⁸ Nur. doc. NO-2125.

²⁹ Felicja Karay, "The Conflict Among German Authorities Over the Jewish Forced Labor Camps in the Generalgouvernement," (Hebrew) *Yalkut Moreshet*, 52, April, 1992, p. 116.

IV. Why a Camp for Women?

The reduction in the "import" of foreign workers into Germany also affected the labor force in the military plants (*Wehrmacht-Betriebe*). According to official statistics of the Armaments Ministry, on 31 December 1944, 5,981,700 people were employed in 11,949 factories, with the figures below demonstrating the changes that had taken place in the proportion of foreign workers³⁵ (see table below).

Employment Figures for the Munitions Industry

Data	No. of Plants	No. of Employees	Of Total Employees				
			Women		Foreign Workers		
			Total	%	Total (incl. Ostarb.)	Foreign Residents & Jews	POW's
20.6.44	11,220	5,977,000	1,868,000	31.2	2,090,200	1,688,200	402,000
31.10.44	12,198	6,224,100	2,152,000	34.5	2,276,400	2,014,004	262,000
31.12.44	11,949	5,981,700	2,135,000	35.6	2,246,800	2,001,800	245,000

The manner in which the Jews are listed is of particular interest. Directives of the Armaments Ministry in regard to work force statistics state that concentration and labor camp inmates of non-German descent, including Jews, are to appear together under the heading "Others" (*Sonstige, Ausländer u. Juden*).³⁶ It would appear that the Armaments Ministry did not wish to underscore the number of Jews for fear they might be removed from the plants.

The figures indicate a significant rise in the number of both plants and workers between June and October 1944. When both these figures drop towards the end of the year, however, there is a conspicuous increase in the percentage of women among factory personnel. This was not the result of the recruitment of additional German

³⁵ RM.f.Rü u. Kriegsproduktion, Berlin, 23 Februar 1945, "Ergebnis der Beschäftigtenmeldung. Stichtag 31 Dezember 1944," BA, R 3/3009.

³⁶ RM f. Rü u Kriegsproduktion, "Runderlass für die Arbeitseinsatz, 10 Nov. 1944," BA, R 3/1817.

Location of Camp	No. of Prisoners on 15 Aug. 1944
Leipzig- Schönefeld	2,951
Schlieben	998
Altenburg	1,000

The preferential treatment afforded Hasag is apparent repeatedly. On the list of 16 women's *Aussenkommando*'s under Buchenwald from 25 November 1944, the five Hasag plants account together for about 50% of the total number of prisoners (10,117 out of a total of 20,529).⁴⁵ By the end of 1944, Hasag had eight forced labor camps, their prisoner population on 31 January 1945 numbering 16,581, including 10,557 women (Jewish and otherwise) and 4,024 men (all Jews).⁴⁶ Hasag sustained its special status until the end of the war. In March, 1945, Buchenwald administered 27 women's camps with a total of 26,000 prisoners. Hasag was the only concern to maintain five of these camps.

The list of Hasag camps (see below) reveals that in contrast to the relative precision with which the records of other camps were kept, there is a curious lack of data concerning the camp at Herzberg. In response to a question put to him on 31 July 1946, Oswald Pohl testified that he was not personally familiar with the camps run by the private sector. When his interrogator noted that seven camps were listed as belonging to Hasag, Pohl answered that "there should be more."⁴⁷ The fact is that the Herzberg camp does not always appear on lists of Buchenwald's *Aussenkommando*'s. What was its dark secret?

After the war, confidential documents of the German Research Society (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*) were discovered in the city of Wrocław in Poland concerning the activities of Nazi scientific institutions. Among them was a report from 24 June

⁴⁵ D. Vaupel, *Das Aussenkommando*, p. 72.

⁴⁶ *Mahnung und Verpflichtung*, pp. 252-255, 292-306; Z. Zonik, pp. 490-498.

⁴⁷ Nur. doc. NI-388.

List of Buchenwald Camp *Außenkommando*

Assigned to Hasag on 31 January 1945

Plant Name	Products	Camp Opened On:	No. of Prisoners		
			Women Jew. & oth.	Men (Jews)	Total
Leipzig-Schönefeld	Should. mis., ammunition	1.9.1944(w) 24.11.1944(m)	5,067	221	5,288
Herzberg a/Elster	Explosives				2,000*
Schlieben	Should. mis.,	1.9.1944	242	2,339	2,581
Altenburg	Ammunition	1.9.1944	2,616	52	2,668
Taucha		7.9.1944(w) 10.10.1944(m)	1,256	426	1,682
Meuselwitz	Should. mis., ammunition	6-9.10.1944	1,376	290	1,666
Colditz	Ammunition	29.11.1944		300	300
Flössberg		28.12.1944		396	396
Total			10,557	4,024	16,581

* as of 15 August 1944

1942 regarding the investigation of cases of poisoning by explosives at a pharmaceutical plant in Berlin. One of the members of the investigating team was Dr. Fritz Jung, who presented a confidential overview of working conditions at the Hasag plant in Herzberg. In his report ("*Bericht über gewerbliche Vergiftungen mit Dinitrobenzol*"), Jung described the appalling conditions and high morbidity rate of those prisoners whose job it was to pack shells and bombs with explosives. Phenomena such as a drop of 30% in hemoglobin, extreme anemia, and digestive complaints were all too common. The June 24th report also refers to experiments carried out on the prisoners at various locations in order to study the sensitivity to explosives.⁴⁸ This document may contain a hint as to

⁴⁸ T. Czuj, C. Kempisty, Z. Ojrzyński, "Działalność hitlerowskich instytutów naukowych w świetle tajnych dokumentów Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, odnalezionych we Wrocławiu," *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badań Zbrodni Hitlerowskich* (BGKBZH), XXVI, 1975, p. 195.

my duty to inform you of this, since without this assistance I would have not have been able, not even approximately, to achieve the results in the previous "Infanterie" project and the present "Panzerfaust" project that the facts evidence.⁵⁰

This personnel policy paid off. In each of the Hasag plants, the machines operated at full capacity, with tens of thousands of cartons of shoulder missiles loaded onto the trains rolling constantly eastward. In November, 191944 alone, over one million shoulder missiles were turned out. Upon receipt of the report from Hasag, Speer immediately informed Hitler of the success of the project, and on 30 November 191944 wrote personally to Paul Budin:

Dear Mr. Budin,

I received the figures of the monthly production of shoulder missiles for the month of November and reported them to the Führer. The Führer has empowered me to express his appreciation and convey his gratitude for this achievement to you and your staff⁵¹ (see fig. 4.).

According to the German historian Georg Janssen, the "shoulder missile project" was the last major munitions feat accomplished by the Third Reich.⁵²

⁵⁰ Nur. doc. NI-315.

⁵¹ RM. Speer an Gen. Dir. Budin, Berlin, 20.11.1944, BA, R 3/1574, Bl. 89.

⁵² G. Janssen, p. 290.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CAMP

I. How the Camp Came into Being

The first of the chain of Hasag camps to be set up was Leipzig-Schönefeld. Its history begins at some distance away, in the camp of Majdanek in occupied Poland, and is linked from the start to the tall slim figure of its commandant, Untersturmführer Wolfgang Plaul.

In the Summer of 1943, Plaul visited Majdanek several times to supervise the transport of male prisoners to the camp at Buchenwald.¹ The purpose of his visits changed in the Spring of 1944. To judge by the results, he was now charged with the task of selecting the group of female prisoners that were to become the "founding mothers" of the Leipzig-Hasag camp. In April, 1944, the Majdanek office began preparing a list of women slated for the new transport. The list included the whole of a large group of Polish political prisoners who had been sent to Majdanek in January, 1943 from Pawiak, the infamous Warsaw prison, as well as a number of Polish women who had been at Majdanek for a long time, some of them functionaries in the camp's internal administration. On 19 April 1944, a "special transport" of 566 Polish women and 10 female prisoners of other nationalities started on its way to Ravensbrück.²

Why were Poles chosen? According to Albert Schwartz, who was undoubtedly very familiar with the facts, "when it came to workers, the category of prisoners or their nationality was of no importance, only their professional skills."³ It should be recalled that it was the commanders of Ravensbrück who had the most experience with female

¹ Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk, *Niebo bez ptaków*, Warszawa, 1968, p. 229 (herewith: *Niebo bez ptaków*).

² Sondertransport - Überstellung von Lublin, 21.4.1944, Archiwum Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku.

³ Testimony of Albert Schwartz; see Chapter One, note 28.

kitchen. The story of their courage reverberated throughout the camp, and earned them universal admiration.⁷

On that same day, 9 June 1944, the transport arrived at Leipzig-Schönefeld, where the prisoners were received by Wolfgang Plaul, already a familiar face to some of the women from Majdanek. They were confined to isolated barracks at some distance from the Hasag factories. Conditions were surprisingly good: it was clean, there was plenty of bread, excellent soup, and a variety of additions to the menu. Incredible! After the horrors of Ravensbrück, for many of the women, these luxuries made the place seem like a "resort" (*kurort*)!⁸

In July, 1944, the first transport was joined by a few dozen new women from Ravensbrück, most of them Polish.⁹ But they were still not enough to satisfy Hasag's production needs. Consequently, in June, 1944, Budin had already looked into the possibility of procuring Hungarian Jews. That month, the Jews of Hungary were being sent directly to the ovens of Auschwitz, so that Ravensbrück remained the only reserve of female workers.

As Elisabeth Will, who was brought to the camp in January, 1944, writes in her memoirs:

On 22 July 1944 a large transport left Ravensbrück for Hasag-Leipzig. In the selection preceding the transport, women prisoners from various countries were singled out: France, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Ukraine, Russia, Greece, Holland, Germany, Hungary. There were also gypsies. The lucky ones were given new clothes, including underwear, a gray dress, a striped jacket, woolen socks, and shoes. This changed the whole mood: I felt wonderful, all at once the atmosphere was different, our departure turned into a real victory parade...After Ravensbrück the world seemed very fine....Their arrival at Leipzig was greeted by an air-raid siren and the prisoners looked on with pleasure at the panic of the Germans racing for the shelters.

⁷ "The Debate Over the Behavior of the Polish Women Functionaries in the Leipzig-Hasag Camp," letter from M. Woliniowska, April, 1996, YV, 0-33/4237 (herewith: "The Debate").

⁸ Testimony of Jadwiga Wolska-Landowska, YV, 0-33/4238.

⁹ Testimony of Barbara Wojtowicz-Natanson, YV, 0-3/4241.

merchant" ("*marchand de vaches*"). Pflaum was particularly infamous for his brutality toward the female prisoners, beating them mercilessly.¹⁴ Part of his job was to select the inmates for the various munitions plant transports, and in this capacity he sent an additional 240 women of different nationalities to Leipzig. They entered the camp in three groups: the first (12) on 28 August 1944; the second (200) on 30 August 1944; and the third (28) on 5 September 1944.¹⁵

With the suppression of the Warsaw uprising in August, 1944, tens of thousands of Poles were deported from the city, among them thousands of women who were sent to Ravensbrück. It was these women who made up the majority of another transport of 500 prisoners who arrived at the camp on September 9.¹⁶ Three of the prisoners in this transport, along with 12 others, appear on a separate list from 22 November 1944 indicating that they were sent from Auschwitz.¹⁷

Starting in August, 1944, there was a change in the disposition of Hungarian Jews, with some of them being sent to work at munitions plants. At last, Hasag was able to share in the "spoils." On 3 December 1944, a final transport of 500 women was added to the camp population. The main core of this group was 278 Jewish Hungarians, joined by small numbers of Jewish prisoners of German, French, Croatian, Slovenian, Dutch, and several other nationalities.¹⁸

On 27 August 1944, the administrative procedure of transferring the Leipzig camp to the authority of Buchenwald was complete.¹⁹ As noted above, the prisoners were now assigned new identification numbers. According to the memo regarding "Distribution of Numbers to *Aussenkommando's* of Women" (*Nummerverteilung bei den weiblichen Aussenkommandos*), issued by Buchenwald's political department on 25 November 1944,

¹⁴ Trial of Hans Pflaum at Rastadt, AGK, Zespół KL Ravensbrück, sygn. 55, pp. 7, 24.

¹⁵ KL Buchenwald, 9.10.1944, Weibliche Zugänge nach Aussenkommando Hasag-Leipzig, AGK, KL Buchenwald, sygn. 55, pp. 75-83.

¹⁶ Weimar-Buchenwald, "Neuzugänge vom 26 Sept. 1944," AGK, KL Buchenwald, sygn. 55, pp. 66-74.

¹⁷ "Frauenaußenkommando Hasag Leipzig-Schönefeld", Dr. Irmgard Seidel, Gedenkstätte-Buchenwald, private collection.

¹⁸ Weimar-Buchenwald, "Neuzugänge vom 3 Januar 1945," v.n. 16, pp. 75-83.

¹⁹ This date appears in a letter of 22 December 1944 from the directress of Ravensbrück regarding the transfer of the prisoner Danuta Brzosko to the administration office of the Buchenwald camp; see *Matylda*.

changes that occurred resulted not only from transports arriving, but also from those leaving the camp, among them:

1. Transports to Auschwitz of women weeded out in selections (the debilitated, ill, pregnant women, and children), the majority of them Jewish.
2. The return of small groups or individual prisoners to Ravensbrück for administrative or other reasons.
3. The transfer of prisoners from one Hasag plant to another in accordance with production needs, changes in personnel, etc. In August, 1944, for example, 80 women were sent to Schlieben, and in February, 1945, 100 to Taucha.²² Interestingly, while the exchange of prisoners among other Hasag camps was quite common, "outgoing transports" from Leipzig became increasingly rare as early as the Autumn of 1944.

With a population of 5,067 female prisoners on 31 January 1945, Hasag-Leipzig was the largest of all the women's auxiliary camps (*Aussenkommando*) administered by Buchenwald.

II The Commandant and His Staff

Following accepted procedure, the staff of the Leipzig camp included a commandant and a team of female SS overseers (*SS-Aufseherinnen*). The first issue that warrants investigation are the special skills of Wolfgang Plaul that earned him the post of camp commandant and kept him from being sent to serve his country on the Eastern front, as might have been expected for a healthy young German man. There is no doubt that he already had a long, rich career behind him. Born in 1909, he joined the Nazi party in 1931. Between 1935 and 1937, he was assigned to the concentration camps of Sachsenburg and Sachsenhausen, and in 1939 was at Wewelsburg. During this time, he also served on a firing squad. The years 1941-42 found him in Buchenwald, where he was the commandant of the preventive detention camp (*Schutzhaftlagerkommandant*). After a stint in the auxiliary camp Laura in 1943-44, he was appointed to the post of commandant of Hasag-Leipzig.²³

²² Testimony of Zofia Fugiel.

²³ Lebenslauf des Kommandoführers Wolfgang Plaul, Gedenkstätte Weimar-Buchenwald, Museum.

The women inducted into the SS did not have the right to object to or appeal their conscription orders, and were required to undergo training at Ravensbrück. Presumably, those found unsuitable for the job during the course of this instruction were sent home.²⁶ Those who volunteered did so because they could expect higher wages and better conditions than they had enjoyed in their previous place of work. Compensation was determined according to age, seniority, and family status. Thus, for example, an unmarried beginning SS overseer aged 21-22 earned 125 marks, while her married colleague earned 135. Uniforms and shoes were issued free of charge. The women themselves were responsible for other expenses, including taxes and the German Labor Front Levy (*Deutsche Arbeitsfront* - D.A.F.), as detailed below:

Monthly Budget of a Single SS Overseer (Expenses)

	Marks
Food	37.20
Accommodation (single room)	15.00
Taxes	7.50
D.A.F.	2.40
Health insurance	10.00
Underwear & Entertainment	43.00
Total	115.10

It is clear from these figures that the SS overseers did not live a life of luxury. The appeal of service in a concentration camp thus lay in the possibility of adding to their income by the theft of prisoner property. In 1942-43, some 3,000 German women completed their training at Ravensbrück. At the end of the six-week course, graduates were assigned posts in a camp for women or in the women's division of a concentration camp for both sexes.²⁷

What sort of "training" did these recruits receive? In 1966, one of them, Ulla Jürss, was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes against humanity. West German television (NDR) defined her "studies" as "training in deriding and exterminating human beings" (*"Schulung in Menschenverachtung und Zerstörung"*). The men and women in

²⁶ D. Vaupel, *Das Aussenkommando*, p. 76.

²⁷ Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück*, Paris, 1973, pp. 92-93 (herewith: G. Tillion).

The record shows that a total 268 overseers were assigned to 14 outside squads, 80 of them in Hasag camps. Hasag-Leipzig is the second largest after Krupp in terms of staff members. A similar list from 31 January 1945 puts the number of SS guards at Hasag-Leipzig at 81, and the number of female overseers at 50.³¹

The members of the staff of overseers were not constant, with changes occurring both for objective (illness, etc.) and disciplinary reasons. One list for *Aussenkommando Hasag-Leipzig* compiled at Buchenwald (undated) contains only 47 names.³² Another list of 94 SS women overseers attached to a letter of the National Committee of the Politically Persecuted in Bavaria from 23 September 1947 includes, in addition to those names already known, three more women noted as serving at Leipzig.³³ Nine additional names appear on various documents of the Buchenwald administration dealing with matters of personal equipment³⁴ (see fig. 5). These figures indicate that a total of 59 SS overseers were assigned to the camp at Leipzig at various times.

Following regular procedure, a head overseer (*SS-Oberaufseherin*) was also posted to Hasag-Leipzig. Officially, she was directly responsible to the camp commandant and it was her job to supervise the rank-and-file overseers and ensure that they reported for work in the plant, together with the prisoners, precisely on time. She herself was in charge of activities only within the camp itself, her duties including keeping a roster of those inmates who were ill. On the basis of existing sources, there is some confusion as to the name of this "Oberka," as she was known by the prisoners. In response to the testimony of several Polish women before the Polish War Crimes commission, an investigation was begun against the overseer Elfriede Kaltoven on charges of brutality toward the Leipzig inmates. She claimed that the *Oberaufseherin* in the camp was an SS overseer by the name of Saletsky, with Käthe Heber as her second-in-command. Arrest warrants were issued for both women.³⁵

³¹ K.L. Buchenwald, Frauen-Außenkommandos, 31 Januar 1945, *Mahnung und Verpflichtung*, p. 255.

³² KDO Hasag-Leipzig, THA, NS 4 Bu, Vlg. 99, pp. 171-172.

³³ Landesausschuss der pol. Verfolgten in Bayern, München, 23.9.1947, YV, M-21/234.

³⁴ THA, NS 4 Bu, Vlg. 99, pp. 97, 98. 113. 370.

³⁵ Akta dochodzenia p-ko dozorccom obozu Hasag-Leipzig Charlotte Lehmann, Saletzky i Kathe Heber, YV, JM/3799, sygn. 294, k. 1-12.

dressings them in the striped inmate uniforms divested them of both human and feminine semblance. To this was added further discrimination of the Jewish women. In the words of Rudolf Hess, the commandant of Auschwitz: "The Jewish women died much faster than the men, despite the fact, as I have learned from experience, that **women are generally hardier and more resilient than men, both mentally and physically.**"⁴¹ Hess attributed this to the inmates' mental state, ignoring the fact that the high death rate was the result of the deplorable conditions in the camp.

On the other hand, Hasag's policy was also determined by the company's experience of running forced labor camps in the Generalgouvernement for Jewish inmates of both sexes. Here they learned that under harsh but identical conditions, the women fared better, suffering less from starvation, maintaining personal hygiene, and remaining healthier. This greater endurance derived from several advantages: their heads were not shaved, nor were their clothes taken away from them; and they enjoyed relative "freedom" within the camp, enabling them to establish "trade" among themselves and to conduct a certain social life, including cultural activities.

Taking into account both approaches, Hasag, interested in obtaining the maximum output from "its" women, adopted a "zig-zag" policy in regard to the internal running of the camp. In contrast to the conditions in the concentration camps, the prisoners of Leipzig were housed not in huts, but in a large former factory building on Bautzener Strasse. The sign on the gate read "*Schutzhäftlager*" (preventive detention camp). The building, several stories high, along with the area designated for officers, were surrounded by two high-voltage barbed wire fences and SS watch towers. A number of additional wooden structures, separately fenced and known as *Drugie Pole* ("The Other Field") by the prisoners, also belonged to the camp, and were used to house some of the Poles and Hungarian Jews.⁴²

The building, boasting several balconies, was surrounded by grass. The kitchen, a huge dining hall, and the administration offices (*Schreibstube*) were on the ground floor. The cellar held the food stores, shelters, two large washrooms (*Waschraum*) with hot water in the faucets and showers, and relatively normal toilets, although they lacked

⁴¹ *Wspomnienia Rudolfa Hoessa*, ed. Jan Sehn, Warszawa, 1960, p. 133.

⁴² *Matylda*, p. 48.

According to one testimony, brassieres were forbidden, but the inmates got around this by sewing them themselves. The injunction against belts was dodged by weaving rope bindings.⁴⁵

As in all camps, the greatest problem was food. As far as we can tell from available testimony, each transport arriving in the camp enjoyed a "honeymoon" period courtesy of Hasag. Namely, their daily fare was the regular diet for munitions workers: excellent soup, plentiful high-quality bread, and a variety of supplements. As soon as the SS took over responsibility for supplies, however, conditions worsened. The bread ration was reduced, the quality of the soup declined, and the supplements, such as a slice of salami, a spoonful of jam, or a dollop of margarine, became so small they were barely able to hide the taste of the bitter "coffee." Hasag appears to have learned from experience that hygiene was more important to women than diet, and thus provided reasonable sanitary conditions in compensation for the meager food rations.

Strangely enough, alongside the policy of food deprivation, there was considerable concern for health services in the camp. In principle, matters of health were the province of the Buchenwald administration. According to the *Aussenkommando* records of 31 January 1945 compiled by the Waffen SS garrison doctor (*Der Standortarzt der Waffen-SS*), medical personnel in the "Hasag-Leipzig camp" consisted of:⁴⁶

On behalf of the SS health corps.....Dressler

No. of doctors (prisoners)..... 4

No. of nurses (prisoners).....13

This was the largest medical staff in any of Buchenwald's auxiliary camps, the reason being, above all, a fear of epidemics which represented a two-fold risk. First, it was no longer a simple matter for Hasag to procure new transports of slave laborers, and second, and most importantly, the prisoners here worked in factories within a large city and side by side with Germans. Thus, in contrast to the "infirmaries" in concentration camps and other forced labor camps that came to be known as "corridors to death," on the whole the Leipzig *Revier* offered the prisoners genuine health care. The unit was virtually independent, with internal medicine, surgical, and dental departments, all

⁴⁵ Testimony of Genia Grünberg-Reiser, YV, 0-33/3485.

⁴⁶ See note 31, *ibid*.

made of iron and didn't make a sound!' A little while later we heard that one of the women who had been punished had died of a heart attack. The SS men there laughed at Hofschultke for boasting before, saying: 'You beat a corpse and wasted your strength with your 40 blows!'⁴⁸

As in all the Nazi camps, Hasag-Leipzig could implement their carrot-and-stick policy with the help of a team of functionaries: the *Lagerverwaltung*, the internal camp administration.

IV. "Mistresses or Slaves"?

Following Ravensbrück practice, the primary prisoner functionaries for each Außenkommando were appointed before they left for the auxiliary camp. They were to serve as the core of the internal administration in the new camp. The former Majdanek inmates knew from experience just how great an influence the internal administration had on camp life. Therefore, before leaving Ravensbrück, they chose the major functionaries themselves, and their suggestions were approved in part by the commandant Wolfgang Paul.⁴⁹ Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk's book *Matylda*, along with the extensive testimonies of Irena Pełka-Seńko and Maryla Perlberg-Reich, are the main sources for the various posts in the internal administration of the Hasag-Leipzig camp.

The central post of "camp doyenne" (*Lagerälteste*) was held by Joanna Szumańska, a vain imposing woman with a crown of blond braids, the daughter of a geography professor at Lwów University and a former student and pianist. Before the war, she had socialized with Jews. As she told it, she was arrested for her part in a smuggling ring getting Jews into Hungary. According to another version, under interrogation in prison, she informed on the other members of the group. In Lwów she had been friendly with the Pole Halina Kielar and with Hanka Skowrońska, a Jewish woman with Aryan papers whose real name was Maryla Perlberg (today Reich). The three of them were sent to Majdanek, where they met and formed ties with the political prisoners from Pawiak.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Mahnung und Verpflichtung*, p. 121.

⁴⁹ *Matylda*, p. 46.

⁵⁰ Testimony of Maryla Perlberg-Reich (known as Hanka Skowrońska in the camp), YV, 0-33/3316.

leaving, individual files, etc. All these figures were passed on to the offices at Buchenwald.⁵⁶

Food stores: the workers organised the distribution of bread and other food to the prisoners.

Supplies: Jadwiga Lipska and others. According to the testimony of Jadwiga, her function was restricted to conveying instructions to the food stores as to the commodities to be supplied to the camp kitchen, "and the amount of paper work involved was considerably greater than the amount of food."⁵⁷

Blocks: A *Blockälteste* (or "*blokowa*") was in charge of each block, a post usually held by a Polish inmate. Because of the language problems in the multi-national camp, the *blokowa* would appoint an assistant (*sztubowa*, *Stubendienst*) who shared a common language with the prisoners in the block, and she would be in charge of order and cleanliness, food distribution, etc. Thus, for example, the French block had a head *sztubowa* (a Frenchwoman), who was entitled to choose an assistant and several "group leaders" (*grupowa*) to dole out food. The Polish *blokowa* made do with using its connections with the camp offices and internal police.⁵⁸

Kitchen: There was one kitchen for all the inmates. Unlike for the other functions, the name of only one Polish woman is mentioned as working here, Krystyna Winnicka.⁵⁹ Most of the women in the kitchen were Russian prisoners of war, remembered for their connection to the "rebellion" at Ravensbrück.⁶⁰ Ukrainians were assigned to help them. The prisoners of war were also assigned jobs in maintenance, disinfecting, and gardening.

Canteen: there, coupons ("bons") could be exchanged for a variety of items.⁶¹

The infirmary, or *Revier*, was a separate unit with a rather large staff. As early as August, 1944, two prisoner doctors and one nurse were sent from Auschwitz.⁶²

⁵⁶ Oral testimony of Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk.

⁵⁷ Testimony of Jadwiga Lipska-Węgrzecka, YV, 0-33/4240.

⁵⁸ L. London, pp. 330-331.

⁵⁹ Krystyna Winnicka was the underground name of Barbara Woytowicz-Natanson; see note 9.

⁶⁰ See note 7.

⁶¹ See note 56.

⁶² Danuta Czech, "Kalendarium der Ereignisse im Konzentrationslager Auschwitz-Birkenau," *Hefte von Auschwitz*, Nr. 8, Oświęcim, 1964, p. 64 (herewith: "Kalendarium").

internal administration of Ravensbrück. In the women's camp as well, implementation of this system leads to a pessimistic conclusion, since the same objectives and conditions brought about the same sort of "privileged status" exploited by the authorities, the same perversions and twisted passions, and the same crimes.⁶⁵

A contradictory view is presented by Matylda Woliniewska, a Polish public official and social worker allied with the Socialist party in Poland before the war. Under Nazi occupation, she joined an underground organization, and was incarcerated in the Pawiak prison in Warsaw together with other political prisoners. From there she was transferred to Majdanek and then to Leipzig. At Majdanek she organized self-help in a number of areas, including among the Jewish women, and ran diverse cultural activities, all of which earned the admiration of her fellow inmates.⁶⁶ Her personality and enterprise are described at length in Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk's *Matylda*.

In the opinion of Matylda, the political prisoners sought to choose their own candidates for the various posts and regarded them as public servants. They bore a heavy responsibility and moral imperatives: they had to provide support and aid to the other prisoners in all aspects of camp life, to uphold justice, to mediate between the inmates and the camp authorities, and to ameliorate the hardships imposed on them to the best of their ability.⁶⁷

How these two contradictory approaches operated in reality, and which of them had a greater impact on the daily life in the Leipzig camp, will become clear as we continue to trace its history.

⁶⁵ pp. 212-213.

⁶⁶ Stanisława Demidowicz, "Związek pięciu stworzeń," *Dla Ciebie Polsko*, Olsztyn, 1988, p. 49 (herewith: *Dla Ciebie Polsko*).

⁶⁷ Odezwa Matyldy Woliniewskiej na Kongresie byłych więźniów Majdanka w Polsce w roku 1957, YV, 0-33/4237 (herewith: *Odezwa*).

thirst, fell on the buckets, spilling their contents. It was pure hell inside the cars: the inmates screamed, prayed, wept, cursed. Some became totally indifferent; one way or the other they were being taken to their death, to Auschwitz...

When no more prisoners could be crammed in, the ones remaining were loaded onto open, unroofed cars. A few of the women took this as a good sign: everyone knew that closed cars meant a journey to death. They even got a little bread along the way, which must mean they were being taken to a work camp.² But here as well, they were crowded in so tightly that even with everyone standing up there was no room to move. There were women who bit or hit their neighbors just to sit down. "After standing up for 24 hours, I nearly fainted and fell over on my neighbor, and they yelled at me to get off. I grabbed a pot and threatened to break the head of anyone who tried to move me. I finally got them to let me squeeze in. There was a constant racket and shouting in the car. To keep us quiet, the Germans hurled stones at us, and even piss pots! Lola and a few other prisoners were badly hurt."³

The train sped westward. After the first day it was obvious that they had crossed the Polish border. Another day went by and the train stopped at Leipzig-Schönefeld. The men's cars were immediately uncoupled and went on toward Buchenwald. "We were barely able to climb down from the cars, exhausted, filthy, thirsty." The women were greeted by a large detachment of SS officers and overseers. The prisoners were lined up five across and marched out. They crossed through an industrial zone. The few Germans they passed in the street stared at them wide-eyed. They'd never seen anything like it before! Women with yellow, green, red, purple hair, yellow faces...How could they know that this was their "legacy" from the Skarzysko plants where they had been set to work producing mines. The dust from the explosives, TNT and picric acid, had painted them all in bizarre colors.

The column reached the camp gate. Commandant Plaul was waiting for them, and scrutinized the prisoners closely, row by row.⁴ What a transport! 1200 Jewish women for the Hasag plants, pure gold! The new prisoners could hardly believe their eyes: a camp in a building with grass around it? But this was only the first of the surprises in

² Testimony of Bracha Bar Ilan, YV, 0-33/4839.

³ Testimony, YV: Barbara Reibschied, 0-16/1911; cf. Bina Herstein, 0-33/1796; Jeta Jolinger, 0-33/3419.

⁴ Testimony of Roza Zelwer, YV, 0-3/1074.

hold them for her. The Polish woman shouted at her, saying she had no intention of jeopardizing herself for some Jew. But Malka didn't let up, pleading with her tearfully: we were both deported from Poland by a common enemy, we both dream of going back home. But your homeland and loving parents are waiting for you, and I've lost everything. All I have left are these pictures... The guard wiped her eyes, snatched the envelope of photographs from Malka's hand and shoved her back into line. Malka wasn't the only lucky one. In a similar manner Blanka K nreich was also able to save her family photos.⁷

The Jewish prisoners stayed in their blocks for several days, awaiting the dresses that had yet to arrive from Ravensbr ck. Although they were forbidden to leave the room, many of the women found a way to check out the whole building during those first days. They met some of the other inmates, got a look at the other blocks, and brought back news: there were several thousand woman there from all over Europe; they would again be working in a factory; they already knew all about it! What a camp! There was even a canteen! The older women were less enthusiastic. Felicja Bannet-Sch ftler, an educated woman nearing 40, viewed the situation skeptically. She saw the pallets of the *blokowa* and the *sztubowa* near the window, separated from the others by sheets and blankets, the province of the "ladies of the camp." She saw the crowding, the bed bugs in the mattresses. She heard the sobbing of the women who had again been separated from their loved ones, their husbands, brothers, sons.⁸ What fate awaited them back there in Buchenwald?

On registration day, tables holding boxes of camp files were set up in the *blok*. All of the *Schreibstube* workers were recruited for the task. There was a long line in front of each one. Every now and then the "Oberka" would come in and strike out at prisoners indiscriminately. There was a two-part personal card (*H ftlings-Personal-Karte*) for each woman. The upper half held her number, name, date of birth, family status, religion, pre-war address, parents' names, and father's occupation. Date of arrival in the camp was noted as 4 August 1944, and under "supplied by" appeared RSHA (Reich Main Security Office). "Reason for arrest" read "*Polit. Polin J din*" (political, Polish Jew).⁹ The bottom half of the card listed the prisoner's occupation and the

⁷ Testimony of Blanka K nreich-Ickowicz, YV, 0-33/3421.

⁸ Journal of Felicja Bannet-Sch ftler, YV, 0-33/4096 (herewith: *Journal*).

⁹ KL Weimar-Buchenwald, H ftlings-Personal-Karte, Nr. 1145, YV, BU-(B)51.

the articles of clothing that the inmate had turned over upon arrival in the camp. This item was left empty for the women from Skarżysko. According to Sara Shalem, the prisoners were asked to sign a document stating that they had been arrested for immoral behavior.¹⁰

As they stood in line, it was whispered that for purposes of registration, it was best not to be too young or over 35. Similarly, they would do well not to boast of a university education, and to declare a "practical" occupation. Taking this advice, some of the younger girls added a couple of years to their age. On the other hand, Felicja Bannet-Schäftler declared herself to be a 34-year-old hat-maker. She was assigned number 1145 of the 1200 allocated to the Jewish women (see fig. 7). The number was sewn onto the sleeve of her dress and onto her jacket. Notably, non-Jewish prisoners were given not only a number, but also a red triangle with the letter of their nationality: P for Polish; F for French, and so on. The badge of the Russian prisoners of war bore the letters SU.¹¹

Within a few days, concentration camp uniforms were issued to the newcomers: one single blue and gray striped dress known as a "*pasiak*." The *blokows* informed them they were responsible for this dress and were expected to launder it in their free time, since they would not be get another. In addition, they were each given a striped jacket, socks, wooden clogs, and a bowl, spoon, and cup. Such luxuries! There had been no bowls at Skarżysko; they had had to eat out of empty tin cans. Could it be that the Jews were going to be treated like human beings at Leipzig?

Impatiently, they awaited their first day of work. They were bored just sitting in the block. Here and there, a familiar melody could be heard, but it already had new words:¹²

*Hasag is our father,
The best father there is!
He promises us
Long years of happiness!
In Leipzig - a paradise on earth!*

¹⁰ Testimony of Sara Iwańska-Shalem, YV, 0-33/3332.

¹¹ *Journal*, p. 12.

¹² This is a new version of a song sung at Skarżysko; see *Death Comes in Yellow*, p. 209. See also: Testimony of Rena Taubenblatt-Fradkin, YV, 0-16/249. It appears in the testimony of Ester Netzer (known as Ester Nessel in the camp), YV, 0-33/650.

When the prisoners were lined up, the officials appeared: Joanna the *Lagerälteste*, the "Oberka," and the commandant. Each *blokowa* took her place at the entrance to her block and made her report: how many in the work detail, how many ill and remaining in camp. Commandant Plaul delivered a speech, as he did whenever a new transport arrived. Thus, for example, in Summer, 1944, he received the French women with the warning: "If you don't work, you don't eat. Your primary duty is - obedience."¹⁶ He chose different words for the Jews:

*I am in charge of this prisoner camp. You are prisoners of war under the inspection of the Red Cross, and you have rights. Should anyone abuse them, you are invited to complain to me and the offender will be punished... You will work in the Hasag-Werke Leipzig-Schönefeld munitions and ammunition factory. You will be paid in coupons redeemable at the camp canteen where you can purchase whatever you need. I am hoping for your cooperation. I now wish you pleasant work and am expecting you to help in the war effort of my fatherland, Germany.*¹⁷

His words convinced the Jewish prisoners that this was not just another German ruse; rather, they did, in fact, constitute vital manpower for Hasag. After all, they were trained experienced workers! By now it was 5:30. Roll-call was complete and the women marched toward the gate in rows of five. They were arranged according to their place of work, each group identified as a "commando." They headed for the factory. Armed SS guards marched on both sides of the column, joined by the overseers. They were not permitted to talk or to turn their heads: *Halt die Klappe!* (Shut your mouth). Thousands of women marched in time, the thousands of pairs of wooden clogs raising clouds of dust. "Left! Left!" Anyone who didn't keep up got herself a shove. The guards didn't strike them; they were passing through populated streets. "Left! Left!" The guard dogs ran between the rows, ready to sink their jaws into anyone who stepped out of line. Every now and then there was a disturbance, women panicking, screaming. Sicking the dogs on them was one of the favorite diversions of the overseer known as "Drynda" ("rickety wagon" in Polish). In a chillingly vivid description, Danuta

¹⁶ L. London, p. 329.

¹⁷ *Neder*, p. 72.

of the objections of the governor of the Generalgouvernement, Hans Frank, who did not wish for the musicians to see Leipzig in ruins and make this fact general knowledge.²³

The prisoners from the Leipzig camp became the main body of Hasag's factory personnel. The Jewish women who arrived in August, 1944, were greeted by the head foreman, Friedrich, who handed out their work assignments. They were told that they were involved in the production of S-Zü, an enigmatic name interpreted by the women as short for *Zünder*, referring to detonators of various sorts. With the German instructors offering no further information, the women eventually became aware only in general terms that their "products" were connected with the manufacture of shoulder missiles, shells of different sizes, and airplane parts. Friedrich may have been told in advance of their previous experience, as some of them found themselves assigned to machines similar to those they had operated at Hasag-Skarżysko. As a rule, because of the full automation in the plant, the prisoners worked on a single component and had no idea what sort of weaponry it belonged to.

On the whole, working conditions were bearable, including modern sanitary facilities, but there were considerable differences between the various departments. In contrast to the claims made in certain testimonies, the Jewish workers were not assigned to the more difficult jobs. In most departments, the personnel was multi-national. This was even true in the most arduous of all, the machine department, manned by both a day and a night shift.²⁴ Felicja Bannet was posted here, and describes the work in her journal:

The glass ceiling lets in the heat of the sun. Dozens of electrical machines, large and small, emit even more heat into the air, which is suffused with the stench of sweat, rancid oil, and low-grade grease. We are stupefied by the noise of motors, the screech of saws and drills, the shouts of foremen and overseers, cursing in every language under the sun, and the killing pace of the work. Sweat pours into your eyes, your hands repeat the same gestures mechanically. The quota, for the moment, is 5 crates. There are over 450 nuts in every crate. Each has to be fixed into the machine and drilled with 6 bits of different shapes

²³ Arbeitssitzung am 3 March 1944, Hans Frank, Tagebuch, YV, JM/21, Nr. 11, p. 34.

²⁴ Testimony of Hanka Szklanka-Wolańska, YV, 0-3/1174.

Jews, Poles, and Frenchwomen worked in the Hasag Nordwerk plant, where there was no ventilation in the summer since the window had to be kept closed because of the blackout regulations. The heat, stifling air, and sweat became intolerable. Over time, the lack of air caused many of the women to suffer from anemia. Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk, who worked here for a while, describes a typical incident. Because of the unbearable heat, the prisoners tried to take a drink from the faucet whenever they could, until they forbidden to do so and then found it wrapped in rags. One day there was a visit from a review committee of Wehrmacht officers who were shown around by Commandant Plaul and the foremen. When the entourage reached Danuta, one of the officers asked her how the work was. Knowing she spoke German, the other prisoners pushed her forward and she complained of the heat, the lack of sleep, and the shut-off faucet. The next day they found it working again.²⁸ The Jewish women also found another way to get some relief from the heat. Although forbidden to do so, they removed their undershirts and pants and worked only in their dresses.

The heat was even more oppressive because of the rubber aprons they were forced to wear in order to protect their dresses - government property! They were also issued hair nets so that their hair would not get caught in the machines. "This concern," states Felicja Bannet, "verged on the grotesque. On the one hand, the SS were killing us, and on the other the plant was giving out hair nets! But there was a certain logic in this: a corpse at the machine meant a halt in production, the need to repair the machine, a waste of raw materials! What seemed grotesque was actually careful calculation!"²⁹

The Polish prisoner Zofia Kolečka describes work in the machine department. At the far end of the huge hall near the door there were steel poles 4 meters long. Periodically, she would have to cart one of these extremely heavy poles to the machine, stick it in the allotted holes, and turn on the machine, which made bullets. The bullets had to be scrutinized constantly with the appropriate devices. The work went on for 12 hours, and there was also a night shift.³⁰ The night shift was the hardest to bear. In addition to a "lunch break" when soup was handed out, there was also another 10 minute break during which the women fell into a deep sleep. The night shift suffered severely from lack of sleep, since it was virtually impossible to get more than 4-5 hours

²⁸ *Matylda*, p. 53.

²⁹ *Journal*, p. 17.

³⁰ Testimony of Zofia Fugiel.

ugly woman who viciously slapped the women she felt were taking too long in the toilet, was particularly notorious.³⁷

Fortunately for the prisoners, they were also guarded by overseers of a different sort. There was "Gitla", who treated them well and once even took the trouble to ask why they called her by that name. The women found it hard to supply a suitable answer, and finally explained they had chosen the nickname because of her resemblance to the film actress of the same name...³⁸ Gaunt little "Myszka" ("little mouse" in Polish) is also remembered favorably for not hitting or provoking the prisoners. Some of them managed to get close enough for her to confide her personal history to them. Her father had refused to join the SS, and she had been forced to volunteer in his stead in order to atone for his shameful behavior and ensure that the authorities did not take their revenge on him. Her kindness somewhat alleviated the pain of the blows from "Holenderka", who had the habit of bursting into the "laboratory" in order to make her presence felt.³⁹

The group assigned to the laboratory included, among others, the noted poets Henryka and Ilona Karmel, whose poetry had already earned them a name in Skarżysko,⁴⁰ Mata Hollender, known as a "lobbyist" for her knowledge of German, and Ester Nessel and her mother, Mrs. Kurtz, who was pregnant when she arrived in Leipzig. What sort of work did they do there? This is Henryka Karmel's reply:

You ask what's my job?

What is it I do?

Well, ladies and gentlemen, the bullets I review.

A nice occupation, it helps time go by:

If the bullets kill they're good,

"Shmelz" if they don't make you die.

So remember, because this is fine advice indeed:

Whatever kills is good,

All the rest - we don't need...⁴¹

³⁷ Testimony of Lilian Lichtensztein-Goldberg, YV, 0-33/4837.

³⁸ Testimony of Rina Cypres, YV, 0-33/1857.

³⁹ Testimony of Ester Netzer.

⁴⁰ Felicja Karay, The Social and Cultural Life of the Prisoners in the Jewish Forced Labor Camp at Skarżysko-Kamienna, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 8, Number 1, Spring 1994, pp. 18-19, (herewith: The Social Life).

⁴¹ Henryka and Ilona Karmel, Poems, YV, 0-33/1852.

present difficult stage of the war does not make it possible to satisfy the will of the individual - and this is true both for Germans and for Poles - and that every worker in our plant, whether German or foreign, and starting with myself, is charged with the duty of working his shift to the very end, until the battle with bolshevism is decided!

Anyone believing differently will bear the responsibility, because bolshevism will not show him mercy, but rather, will trod him under.

We must continue to stand together in our strenuous labor. I have always praised the efforts of the Poles employed at Hasag, and I am often troubled that I can not accede to their personal wishes, even when justified, just as I am compelled to deny and put aside my own wishes.

Leipzig, 7 May 1944

P. Budin

The fact that "free" forced laborers were escaping undoubtedly lay behind Budin's eagerness to procure prisoners for his workforce. When the Leipzig camp was set up, it soon became obvious that the prisoners were so closely guarded on their way to the plant that escape was unfeasible. The few incidents vaguely referred to in the testimonies all relate to Russians. According to Maria Schächter, this was made possible by the help of factory workers. Since she knew a little Ukrainian, Maria made friends with two girls who worked in the kitchen and sometimes gave her soup. One of them managed to escape, and in reprisal, the golden braids of which the other, Sonya, was so proud were chopped off.⁴⁵ Ester Nessel adds that on another occasion they learned that several Russian women had escaped. "This was in February, 1945, on a Sunday, when, as usual, I was washing my only dress like the other women. Suddenly the whole camp was called out for a *Strafappell*. We had to stand outside all day in our wet clothes in the freezing cold."⁴⁶

Another incident is related by Paula Gimes: "I managed to hold onto a good civilian jacket, and once a Russian woman asked me if I would trade it to her in exchange for bread. I knew she wanted to escape, so I agreed. Three Russians ran away then. One of them was caught and was punished with blows and being locked up in the bunker. In

⁴⁵ Testimony of Maria Schächter-Lewinger, YV, 0-33/1802.

⁴⁶ Testimony of Ester Netzer.

a punitive assembly, ten women were selected and their heads were shaved."⁴⁷ This may be the same *Strafappell* referred to in the journal of the Polish woman Stanisława Demidowicz:

*One day two girls from our block escaped. We were summoned to a disciplinary assembly and our block was made to stand apart from the others. The camp commandant came and ordered every other row to step forward and picked out each fifth girl. All the others were sent back to the blocks, and the victims were sent to the cellar where their heads were shaved. There were 17 from our block alone, all young girls, and some had such beautiful hair! You there, in the free world, can not imagine how awful they looked. After all, here, a woman's hair is her only grace.*⁴⁸

Of all the incidents reported, none ended in a death sentence and no mention is made of transport to Auschwitz or Ravensbrück. Nonetheless, the reign of terror effectively achieved its aim: there were no more escape attempts. The only option remaining for striking at the military power of Germany was to sabotage production. However, in late 1944, the dilemma faced by every forced laborer became even keener: saboteurs could expect the death penalty, as set down in the order issued by Gerhard Maurer on 11 April 1944.⁴⁹ Why should they stick their necks out? Would a few damaged shells or missiles decide the outcome of the war? On the other hand, they were being used against their brothers and friends who were fighting for their freedom at the front! Did the reign of terror imposed on the slave laborers release them from the guilt of collaborating with the enemy? What did the prisoners themselves think?

*The factory is quiet,
Not much work
Anywhere...
But that is not possible,
We can not rest here!
And so - new production
Must roll out again!*

⁴⁷ Testimony of Paula Gimes, YV, 0-3/1080.

⁴⁸ Stanisława Demidowicz, "List z Buchenwaldu," *Gazeta Olsztyńska*, 26 December 1993, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Nur. doc. NO-1556.

have been a clear division: a few risked getting into trouble; the rest went about their work. The worsening of conditions in the winter of 1944-45, coming on top of the fear of punishment, further demoralized the prisoners. To this were added alarming rumors that "we would never leave here alive; that they would make mincemeat [*siekanka*] of us and blow up the whole camp. It is said that the Germans in the factory are spreading these rumors on purpose to depress us even more and console themselves for the defeats at the front."⁵³

Nevertheless, there were indeed incidents of sabotage. The group of political prisoners from Majdanek who worked in the Hasag Nordwerk plant devised a unique custom to encourage sabotage: the announcement of the number of rejected components (*Ausschuss*) as a "gift" to any woman celebrating her birthday! When Matylda Woliniewska was found to be the main instigator of this practice, there were women who succeeded in smuggling "presents" for her collection through the security check at the gate: damaged bullets and shell casings. She hid them in her bed, and when they got to be too many, she knew how to get rid of them. Even some foreign workers collaborated with her.⁵⁴

The French women, proud of their "title" of political prisoners, also took the issue of sabotage very seriously. As Suzanne Chaumet-Leboindre relates in her memoirs: "I operated a very complicated milling machine with a young Russian girl. It was hard to work together because we didn't understand each other... We had to process 1500 shell casings per 12 hour shift, standing up. We were supposed to use three inspection devices all the time to check that the casings were okay... We only did it when the German foreman was around. I never learned to stop the machine when it wasn't working properly, and sometimes I broke it myself... The supervisors complained that the French women were lousy workers."⁵⁵ Lise Ricol, who arrived in the camp with a large group of underground activists, reports that wherever they worked they committed sabotage "as much as possible."⁵⁶

The Jewish women also performed acts of sabotage, despite the greater danger to them, as they were risking transport to Auschwitz, not only confinement to the bunker

⁵³ See note 48.

⁵⁴ Matylda Woliniewska, *Przeciw przemocy*, YV, 0-33/4237.

⁵⁵ *Kommandos de femmes Ravensbrück*, p. 203.

⁵⁶ L. London, p. 205.

"Little Friedrich" (der kleine Friedrich) goes wild. He races from one station to the next, cursing and threatening. He comes back with whole crates of nuts rejected by the inspection devices and we have to do them again. We smile contentedly, understanding without the need for words. Along with our lack of skill and our poor physical condition, undoubtedly about 50% are cases of sabotage. But with all the meters and the damned inspection devices, it's going to be a lot harder for us here than at Skarżysko."⁶⁰

Attempts at sabotage sometimes improved relations with the foreign workers. Luna Fuss-Kaufman remembers it this way:

There wasn't a specific quota for the lathe I worked on, but the machines worked day and night without a stop. I actually understood exactly how the lathe worked (nobody knew that, of course) and I knew how to position the blades so that they would break. Naturally, this caused a waste of metal and a halt in production. Every time it happened, I'd run, in despair, to the German engineer who ran the whole floor to tell him that the machine had broken down again. A Polish technician worked with me supervising the operation of the machine. He was a nice young man who would sometimes bring me bread, a little butter, or something else to eat. He knew very well what I was doing to the lathe, but he never said a word to anyone about me, even when the Germans complained that he wasn't watching the machine closely enough. I was never punished in any way, and if I'd been caught, it would have been much worse."⁶¹

But relations were not always so good. As Frania Brand-Siegmán relates:

I worked in F hall with a Frenchwoman who was always asking me how much the other Jewish women and I had done. What business was it of hers? Personally, I never did a single piece more than the quota demanded. She did more, so I told her she made herself out to be a great patriot in words, but not in deeds... Sabotage was completely out of the question, it was impossible because they watched us so closely."⁶²

⁶⁰ *Journal*, p. 16.

⁶¹ Testimony of Luna Fuss-Kaufman, YV, 0-33/1819.

⁶² Testimony of Frania Brand-Siegmán, YV, 0-3/2979.

CAPTER FOUR

CHANGING TIMES

I. The Road to the Factory

It was the Autumn of 1944.

Marching off to work again. In columns of five they pass through the gate, one commando after the other. The overseers shout out orders, they straighten the lines, the wooden clogs clatter, and the columns march in perfect order past the camp guards. It is still dark out; the night mists have not yet lifted. The gray procession moves through the deserted streets of Leipzig. It's raining. The figures advance ponderously, their clogs slipping in the wet mud on the ground. The SS guards form a tight cordon around the women, lest one of them should try to make a run for it into a dark alley. Each of the prisoners on the far right and left of every tenth row carries a large lantern. They have to hold it steady so it doesn't sway as they walk. If it does, they feel the whip on their back. Their flimsy dresses are soaked by the rain, freezing them to the bone. Every now and then a harsh bark breaks the silence: *Schneller! Links! Links!* They march on, Russians, Jews, Poles, Greeks, Czechoslovakians, gypsies, French.

Like a giant caterpillar, the column of women moves along the street. The light of the lanterns casts a red glow over their striped dresses and illuminates the heavy bodies of the watchdogs prancing beside the guards. Ahead, outside the circle of light, the street lies in total darkness, and the stumps of the trees brought down by a stray bomb look like twisted shadows. There is silence everywhere, save for the clatter of the wooden clogs and the occasional growl of one of the dogs culminating in a sharp bark.¹

¹ Ilona Karmel, "Al pat lechem" (On a Crust of Bread), *Al Ha-Mishmar*, 19 June 1961, p. 3.

The man has a limp; the woman holds him by the hand. Henia sighs, remembering her husband...Where is he now? Is he still alive?

*Every day I see them, not talking, aglow
Gazing at each other with so much love.
And my heart breathes a sigh, will someone, some day,
Hold my hand in the very same way?
And I think: such a dress, the blue, so fair
The dress that woman has to wear...⁶*

(Henryka Karmel)

Tall fruit trees grow on both sides of the street. So beautiful they are! Yellow pears, red apples... Helena looks down - maybe another miracle will happen? A couple of days ago two pears fell on the ground right in front of her! She picked them up carefully, barely getting away with it without being struck. Of course she gave the other women in her row a bite too.⁷ What a feast! They were so sweet, those two wonderful, juicy pears...

*At night, a storm and gusty winds
Shook the pears off the trees onto the ground
Where they rolled up to the pavement...
In the morning, a long sad line
Of prisoners
And a soldier beside them...
Surreptitiously she bent and picked them up,
And the soldier, an old kind-hearted grandfatherly sort,
Pretended not to see the girls
But was so very ashamed
That those pears could give them such joy...⁸*

(Henryka Karmel)

They have already reached the last crossing before the factory. Why does the walk seem so long today? Is it the rain, or exhaustion? They march on. "I remember a tall

⁶ Henryka Karmel, "Westchnienie," Ela Margulies-Timberg Collection, YV, 0-48/47d-3 (herewith: Margulies Collection).

⁷ Testimony of Helena Schächter-Zorski, YV, 0-33/1797.

⁸ Henryka Karmel, "Gruszki"; see note 3, p. 19.

of cake out of the pocket of his smock.. "It's for you, eat!" Surprised, Esther tried to hide it in her pocket so she could share it with her mother, but Brüchard would not allow it and ordered her to finish it quickly, "because if anyone sees you, they'll arrest me." Having no other choice, Ester swallowed down the whole piece of cake. She knew she was not the only one who Brüchard sometimes rewarded with a tasty "treat." He helped almost all the women in "his" group, where Mata Hollender served as an interpreter for the women who did not speak German. The *Meister* had frequently brought medicines for women who needed them, and was particularly solicitous toward Hanka Kurtz, who was pregnant.¹¹

Was Brüchard's behavior unusual for a German in the plant? The testimony of numerous Jewish and Polish women indicate that the Germans were initially hostile and antagonistic because the SS portrayed the prisoners as criminals, thieves and whores.¹² At first the women were unaware of this attribution, until they learned of it by chance. It must be recalled that unlike the Hasag factories in Poland, there was no "middle level" of Polish overseers or prisoner kapos in Leipzig. Thus, despite the injunctions and threat of punishment, there was direct contact between the inmates and the local staff. Paradoxically, the label of "whore" prompted the blossoming of a complex tissue of relations with the German bosses.

A large number of testimonies describe the initial shock: "One day when I got to work," relates Luna Fuss, "the German foreman asked me why I had been arrested because I looked too young to be a whore. He was amazed to hear that I had been arrested because I was Jewish." Similarly, Henia Buchman tells of being asked: "How come young girls like you are already prostitutes?"¹³ Just how ludicrous the Nazi propaganda was is demonstrated by an incident involving Haneczka that sent shock waves throughout the factory. Haneczka (her family name is unknown), only 12 years old, had succeeded in passing herself off as older than her real age. It was not so easy, however, to pull the wool over the sharp eyes of her elderly German forewoman, who on one occasion lashed out at her saying it was inconceivable that such a sweet quiet young girl could have sunk so low. At first the child did not understand what she was

¹¹ Testimony of Ester Netzer; Henryka Karmel-Wolfe, YV, 0-33/1852.

¹² Testimony of Fela Blatt-Blum, YV, 0-33/1839.

¹³ Testimony of Henia Buchman-Strelski, *We Remember, Twenty-four Members of Kibbutz Megiddo Testify*, (hebr.), Tel Aviv, 1988, p. 70 (herewith: *We Remember*).

him, I'm not happy, because they'll accuse me of collaborating with the Germans." She, too, had a "guardian angel" in the form of a German electrician named Josef who would sometimes bring her bread and occasionally apples!¹⁷ Even the foreman Friedrich, who struck fear into all the women, treated them humanely from time to time, and contrary to their apprehensions, would transfer the prisoners who had trouble operating the more complicated machinery to easier jobs. On the whole, the foremen came to the women's aid in cases of accident or illness, although they tried to be circumspect about it.¹⁸

We can not, however, conclude that this was the situation universally. There were also foremen like Hermann Krüger in the S-Zü department who played it both ways: although he offered no help to the prisoners, he declared that he was not a member of the Nazi party, had never heard of the Final Solution, and had no idea what crimes the women had been arrested for. He did, however, argue with the SS overseers, protesting their striking of the prisoners and the stingy soup rations.¹⁹ Other Germans, such as Keller, in charge of checking bullets, feigned indifference,²⁰ while still others, such as Richard from the automation department, displayed outright hostility.²¹

The German women who worked in the plant as laborers or forewomen were generally simple people, Hasag employees or typical members of the petit bourgeoisie. It was only natural that working alongside women from throughout Europe, and particularly the presence of Jews, aroused their curiosity and made it impossible to obey the prohibition against consorting with the prisoners. The first time the SS overseers were out of sight, questions and answers were exchanged, and thus a broad fabric of human relations slowly evolved.

"In the Zündhütchen department," Fela Schächter recalls, "there were two German women, one young and the other older. The sandwiches they brought to work with them were quite paltry, and I don't remember them ever sharing them with me. They themselves were afraid of the overseer "Miotla", but when she moved away from the door, we would sometimes chat. That's how they found out we weren't prostitutes, but decent educated girls. I remember how amazed I was when I realized that the woman I

¹⁷ Testimony of Rina Cypres.

¹⁸ Testimony of Lea Muskatzenblut, YV, 0-33/1801.

¹⁹ Testimony of Bina Herstein; Letter from Shoshana Adler, 3 May 1992, private collection.

²⁰ Testimony of Jeta Jolinger.

²¹ Testimony of Rina Fradkin.

to show her displeasure by giving Eda a number of sharp slaps on her face, which were accompanied by hearty cursing.²⁶

Malka Zuckerbrot, a religious woman, was unusually fortunate. The German woman who worked alongside her (probably the wife of the electrician Robb), told her in secret about her son who was fatally wounded on the Eastern front. To Malka's great surprise, she discovered that the German was quite familiar with the intricacies of Jewish tradition, and knew exactly when each holiday fell. When Malka asked where this knowledge came from, the German revealed that she had hidden a family of Jewish acquaintances for quite some time until they were informed on and picked up by the Gestapo. "On Yom Kippur," Malka relates, "I fasted, like many of us did. During the break, 'my' German came over and stuck something in my hand. I stole a glance and there in my fist was a red apple wrapped in paper with the words: 'Remember, today is Yom Kippur, a fast day. Eat this apple tonight. I wish you and all your friends a good year and quick redemption'....I was shocked. In this cruel world around us there still beat a human heart, and it lit a spark of hope!"

Ida Kelberg-Buszmicz, only 14 years old, also remembers the elderly German woman who occasionally stuck a slice of bread in her hand, and when no one could hear, would whisper: "Soon, my child, hold on, soon the war will be over."²⁷

The prisoners sometimes chose to show their appreciation for the humane treatment they received from the Germans. The French women who worked with little Nina Tiberger made Christmas ornaments from colored wrapping papers and Nina presented them to the foreman as a gift. He replied by wishing her and her friends that they be liberated in the coming year.²⁸ This was not the only instance of "friendly relations." Luna Fuss, who enjoyed the patronage of the overseer known as "Laleczka" ("little doll" in Polish), made her a present of a doll she fashioned out of rags, even dressing it in a striped dress with a number on her chest.

Relations between the prisoners and their German bosses was not limited to the surreptitious offer of a slice of bread or an apple. Sometimes unexpected circumstances required the women to turn to the Germans directly for help. Such a case involved the

²⁶ Testimony of Helena Zorski; Eda Fenik.

²⁷ Testimony of Ida Kelberg-Buszmicz, YV, 0-3/2798.

²⁸ Nurit Harit (formerly Nina Thieberger), oral testimony.

*An unstoppable stream of words.
 That from the Eastern front his son,
 Had wounded returned from the fray
 Arriving in time to bury his wife,
 The other in hospital lay.
 His leg they'd had to amputate,
 Nothing could save him now,
 And his despair was immensely great.
 Another in Italy fought,
 For months from him not a word did he hear,
 And everyone knew that thousands of men
 Were falling every day there.
 Even the 16-year-old lad
 Who'd just yesterday played in the sand,
 They wouldn't let him stay at home,
 Sent him too to some far-off land.
 He spoke of how they'd said good-by
 Before their final touch...
 But then he coughed and silent fell
 He'd already said too much....³²*

(Henryka Karmel)

There were also some tragic cases. Rut Kornblum, who had been transferred to a different workplace at her own request, enjoyed the beneficence of her new foreman, old Wilhelm. Although he declared himself a loyal supporter of "the Führer," he did not approve of the anti-Jewish policy. Every day for lunch he brought a pot full of food from home which he shared with "his girls." Since they were working with toxic materials, he arranged for them to be issued rubber boots, and occasionally even a glass of milk. When Rut and another prisoner told Wilhelm that their fathers had served in the German Army in World War I, he became a real friend to them. Until the sad day in the Spring of 1944 when the girls arrived at the plant and found Wilhelm hanging from a rope. He left them the pot of food with a note, reading:

³² H. Karmel, "Gdy majster się zapomina," see note 6, *ibid.*

dared to help a Jewish prisoner was risking not only internment in a concentration camp, but also ostracism by his colleagues for his "crimes."³⁴

What, then, brought about the change for the better at Leipzig? According to Lise London, there was a significant turnover of supervisors in the plant because of the demands of army recruitment, and those who remained treated the prisoners better than their predecessors, not reporting incidents of bad conduct or sabotage to the SS overseers.³⁵ Was their behavior dictated only by fear of the approaching front or the awareness that they, like their compatriots, would bear responsibility for Germany's crimes? It does not seem likely, as Felicja Bannet claims, that the SS overseers at Leipzig "did not have the guts to tell the civilian population the truth about us."³⁶ In late 1944, the German population was well-aware of the fate of the Jews and the meaning of the term "concentration camp." For this reason, the prisoners were generally skeptical and regarded any displays of humanitarianism with suspicion. "The Germans at Leipzig were very afraid of the SS, afraid of each other, afraid of their own shadow. True, they treated us more decently than in Poland." Luna Fuss adds: "As the end of the war drew near, the Germans became more humane. My SS overseer revealed a kind heart, but how she behaved before, nobody knows."³⁷

The logical conclusion seems to be that the conduct of the German supervisors at Leipzig toward the prisoners in general, and the Jewish women in particular, was influenced primarily by objective factors: the imminent end to the war, the fear of defeat, and the urgent need to construct an "alibi," both individually and collectively. Even some SS overseers were starting to worry about the future, and chose to temper their behavior in the presence of the civilian population. Let us not forget that any surreptitious offer of a word of comfort or a slice of bread was played out against the background music of bombs raining thunderously on Leipzig.

III. In the Shadow of the Shelling

Throughout 1944, Hasag had to contend with the damage caused by the bombs that fell on the Leipzig factories. Once the camp was set up, injecting new manpower into

³⁴ See the incident involving Karl Herold, *Death Comes in Yellow*, pp. 96-97.

³⁵ L. London, p. 341.

³⁶ *Journal*, p. 26.

³⁷ Testimony of Ester Netzer, Luna Kaufman.

position.⁴¹ The affair resounded throughout all the factory departments, and was commemorated in this poem:

For excellent work, you get a prize!
The German said
And the Frenchwoman replied:
Merci, but no thanks.
I work because you force me to
It's a matter of the heart, you understand, don't you?
Don't thank me, don't you see
That rewarding me
For creating death for my nation
*Is shameful to me?*⁴²

(Henryka Karmel)

It should be noted, however, that the Polish prisoners (at least until the liberation of Poland by the Red Army) were receiving parcels from home.⁴³ Parcels also arrived occasionally for the French through the Red Cross. The Jewish women had no way of getting any outside aid, and were more debilitated. Thus the large majority (if not all) of them accepted the coupons, hoping to be able to purchase a pair of cloth shoes,⁴⁴ a precious item without which they could not expect to survive. In addition to the coupons, the supervisors gave out vouchers for an extra soup ration to those women who exceeded their quota. Some of the Jewish prisoners worked hard for this voucher, while others decided not to make the effort.⁴⁵

Hunger in the camp grew progressively worse, with the march back and forth to the factory, in addition to the 12 hour work day, sharpening the women's appetite. In February, 1945, the bread ration was reduced to a fifth of a loaf. Potatoes cooked in their skins had disappeared long ago. The soup ration doled out at the factory thus became the main meal of the starving prisoners, so that not surprisingly its appearance at noon became the highpoint of the day. As Paulina Buchenholz puts it: "I was kept alive by sleep, a hot shower, and the soup. Life revolved around the soup, and I felt as

⁴¹ L. London, p. 341.

⁴² Henryka Karmel; the poem appears in the testimony of Malka Hottner.

⁴³ Matylda, pp. 50-51.

⁴⁴ Testimony of Frania Siegman.

⁴⁵ Testimony of Eda Jewin; Luna Kaufman.

working nearby passed news from the front to their compatriots, along with sewing materials and even books - no less important.⁵¹ Now and then Czech and Polish workers found the opportunity to whisper "Hang in there!" to one of the prisoners, and if they dared to risk it, snuck cigarettes or bread to "their" girls, or perhaps even helped them with some particularly strenuous task.⁵²

Towa Zilberberg relates the following incident: "Once I was working the night shift. The work was exhausting and I couldn't keep my eyes open... All of a sudden I found that a man who looked Jewish but who spoke an unfamiliar foreign language was standing beside me. I managed to make out that he was Italian... He stood there, and seeing how tired I was began to work side by side with me, doing some of my work. To this day I don't know who he was. Was he a prisoner like us?... Maybe a Jew?"⁵³

Although they worked together, no mention is made in any of the testimonies of romantic relations between the prisoners and the foreign workers. This goes to show how well the SS overseers performed their duties. It was easier for friendships to develop among the inmates working side by side. Bina Herstein, who worked in Hermann Krüger's department, became friendly with a Frenchwoman who translated the instructions for her. Eda Lewin recalls her French friend who volunteered for work at Hasag in order to be closer to her husband, who was a prisoner of war. She told Eda what was going on in the outside world and often brought her a bit of food. The women also took advantage of the presence of other nationalities to learn foreign languages. Claiming to be giving each other instructions regarding their work, they whispered back and forth, and thus learned French, English or Russian. German was not a particularly popular language of study, for obvious reasons. Danuta Brzosko managed to compose a Polish-English dictionary. Sara Shalem, Ester Nessel and others also tried to learn as they worked.

Another of the forbidden methods the women used to help pass the time during their many hours of tedious labor was to write poems or copy them out under the table and learn them off by heart. They tried to remember the poems they had been taught in school and wrote new "timely" ones. It is no exaggeration to say that this "hobby" occupied women of all nationalities. Among the Jewish prisoners, the most popular

⁵¹ L. London, p. 337.

⁵² *Neder*, p. 79; testimony of Halina Razowski.

⁵³ Towa Zilberberg, *Mama, Your Prayers Have Been Answered!*, (hebr.) Bney Brak, 1994, p. 240. (herewith: T. Zilberberg)

department to use for this purpose. For many years she took great care to preserve the forms on which she wrote out the poems, until they found their way to the archives of Yad Vashem (see fig. 10).⁵⁵

Despite the hardship, there was a certain benefit to working in the factory: it was possible to make contact with the outside world. The Polish women had the best chances of doing so. As we have seen, there was an infirmary on the factory grounds where even rather complex surgery was performed. The head surgeon was a Pole, Dr. Tomasz Goryński, who worked together with a doctor from the Buchenwald camp. The nurses from the Leipzig camp would bring the surgical patients to the infirmary and then remain in the operating theater with the two doctors, with no German guards in attendance. They used the opportunity to pass letters from their compatriots, through the doctors, to friends and relatives incarcerated at Buchenwald.⁵⁶ There were also illicit relations with women prisoners from Ravensbrück; One of these, Helonowa, confirms that she received letters that were smuggled out of the Hasag-Leipzig camp by Polish inmates, and she passed them on.⁵⁷ It is likely that the Karmel poems also reached the "outside" in a similar manner.

Zofia KołECKA describes the organization of illegal correspondence. Messages to family members were written on postcards marked with numbers. Mieczysław Kotwica, a Pole who worked in Zofia's department, was given a list of addresses with corresponding numbers. He would add the address and post them. Sadly, Zofia and two of her friends were caught at the camp gate with some 40 illegal postcards in their possession. The three of them were sentenced to six days in the bunker, where they suffered from cold, hunger, and rats, and then were transferred to the camp at Taucha.⁵⁸

There were also a few Germans in the plant who were willing to take the risk of conveying crumbs of information about the outside world to the prisoners. A young, one-eyed German electrician by the name of Robb, "suspected" of being a communist, worked in Hala F. He regularly brought Maria Schächter news of the situation at the front and in the rest of the world, whispering it to her furtively when he came to "fix" her machine. Newspapers were even more precious. Every now and then, Meister

⁵⁵ Margulies collection, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Testimony of Irena Seńko

⁵⁷ Urszula Wińska, *Zwyciężyły wartości, Wspomnienia z Rawensbrück*, Gdańsk, 1985, p. 238.

⁵⁸ Testimony of Zofia Fugiel.

CHAPTER FIVE

"HIGH-LEVEL POLITICS" AT LEIPZIG

I. Commandant Plaul's "Enlightened" Regime

The tall figure of Commandant Wolfgang Plaul seldom appeared in the long corridors of the Leipzig camp, as it seldom appears in the testimonies of the prisoners. Although they knew nothing of his previous record, experience had taught them to keep a safe distance from any SS officer. The Polish women called him "Kogut" (Polish for "rooster") because of his protruding Adam's apple, and sometimes he was referred to by the nickname "Głupi Jasio" (Jasio the fool).¹ Did the name suit him? Or did Plaul perhaps succeed in operating the camp in the spirit of the times, that is, out of concern for his future, which no longer seemed so bright?

Descriptions of the commandant's behavior are quite varied, so that we can not give an unequivocal answer to this question. Danuta Brzosko, who spoke German, had worked as a charwomen in the SS officers' casino at Majdanek and knew Plaul well. She describes him as a hot-tempered man, famed for his flare-ups, sometimes violent ones, who beat the women and liked to unleash his vengeance on them. Indeed, when she arrived at Leipzig, he assigned her to the hardest work in the plant because of her "impudence." At the same time, in the role of interpreter she did not hesitate to convey her fellow prisoners' requests to him, such as permission to receive parcels from home or to send letters out of the camp. In most cases, he granted these requests.²

Only few people had close contact with the commandant, and, as stated above, his presence was felt mainly during inspections or spot checks at the camp gate. In the

¹ Testimony of Maryla Reich; Jadwiga Landowska.

² Matylda, pp. 45; 52.

laughter, saying: "*Ach, so! Hast doch deine Ernährung von deinem Name*" (Is that so! Then you can live off your name!).⁶ Malka did not know what to make of his response. She had a stroke of luck on a much graver occasion. In her mattress she had hidden family photographs she had managed to smuggle into the camp with the help of a Polish supervisor, and they were discovered by one of the SS-overseers. When Malka was hauled in to be interrogated, Plaul asked her if she had relatives in Palestine, what army her father had served in during World War I, and so on. Terrified, she was barely able to answer him. The commandant concluded the interrogation with the dramatic declaration: "The war is finished, but so are we!" - and let her go. Felicja Bannet "ruins" this pretty picture by depicting Plaul in her *Journal* as a fastidious man who did not wish to dirty his hands by striking the prisoners, but nevertheless referred to them contemptuously and hurtfully as a "Schweinepack" (a pack of swine).

Who, then, did Plaul's "dirty work"? Two groups were available for the job: the staff of SS overseers headed by the "Oberka," and the internal administration under Joanna Szumańska. The following incident illustrates the "balance of power" between these two "mistresses" of the camp. It happened in the Spring of 1945, during roll-call. The women were pouring out, but not at a speed that suited Joanna, and she shoved one of the Russians. Her victim, a "prisoner of war" who demanded to be treated accordingly, hit her back. Joanna immediately complained to the "Oberka" (who, on the basis of the description, appears to have been Käthe Heber). During the roll-call, Käthe slapped the Russian woman across the face repeatedly, drawing blood. The silent mass of prisoners were filled with rage, and there was a clear sense of mutiny in the air. The Red Army was already on German land! When the Russian was sent back to her place, the women beside her heard her whisper: "Just wait!"⁷

The "Oberka" beat the inmates with her fists as well, going particularly wild if she found any contraband during inspection at the camp gate, items such as a piece of bread, an apple, or paper or rags pilfered from the factory. A new prisoner's first experience of her displeasure always came as a surprise, for it was hard to believe that such an attractive woman, with her brown eyes and golden curls, could behave with such brutality. Her favorite collective punishment was a general roll-call in which all the

⁶ In German, *Zuckerbröt* is a type of cake; testimony of Malka Hottner.

⁷ *Journal*, pp. 21; 39.

guilty of similar crimes. Anyone reading this correspondence can not fail to find it both incredible and ludicrous. Their world was falling apart around them, yet the Buchenwald commanders had nothing more to worry about than a pair of socks?! Nor did they relent. The derelict overseers were forced to repay the value of any unreturned item into the Buchenwald coffers.⁹ It is not surprising that these women are described by Danuta Brzosko as hungry for power and full of rage. The names of several of them appear on the lists of war criminals: Urszula Abeling, Margarete Deliga, and Gretel Roessler.¹⁰ It can not be denied, however, that a number of overseers are mentioned favorably. Paula Gimes testimony is a model of fairness, describing the merciless overseer formerly at Auschwitz, but not forgetting the "girl with the dog" who she would send on ahead to warn the prisoners of her approach. With obvious emotion, Paula also remembers the *Aufseherin* who saved her life by getting her out of the infirmary just before a selection.¹¹

The overseer most often mentioned in the testimonies was a short plump blond woman by the name of Anneliese, perhaps the only one who can be positively identified.¹² She was in charge of the Jewish block, and proclaimed solemnly that she would treat them all well. She earned her popularity not only by keeping that promise, but also by virtue of the "juicy" affairs she was involved in. With no men in the camp, there was not much to gossip about, until it was learned that Anneliese was a lesbian who periodically invited some inmate or other to a midnight tryst in the shelter. Public opinion was mixed. On the one hand, she was appreciated for her fair treatment, but on the other, the prisoners were suspicious that she might be trying to get too close to them. As for her "victim" of the moment, she clearly enjoyed a significant improvement in food and clothes. This aroused no public outrage, but rather disgust and regret over the demoralization of the woman. The authorities eventually became aware of the situation and Anneliese was transferred to another camp. Her last companion was sentenced to three days in the bunker.¹³

⁹ KZ Bu, Arbeitslager Leipzig, Betrifft Bekleidung der SS Aufseherinnen, Leipzig, 25.2.1945, THA, NS 4 BU, VLG. 99, p. 314.

¹⁰ See Chapter 2, note 33.

¹¹ Testimony of Paula Gimes.

¹² The name Anneliese Giese appears on a number of lists; see also note 8.

¹³ Testimony of Maria Lewinger; Paulina Buchenholz; Helena Zorski; and others; *Journal*, p. 33.

Journal we find that "she was a servant of the totally inhumane Hitlerism who deserves to be hanged. It was only when talking with the Commandant that she struck a seductive feminine pose, staring at him adoringly as she awaited his orders."²⁰ Animosity toward Joanna grew stronger when the "ka-eltniks" arrived from Skarzysko and told of her brutality at Majdanek, where she was known as "Tygrys" (Polish for "tiger") because she bared her teeth when she beat them.²¹ At Leipzig she ordered nighttime roll-calls even in the freezing cold, and anyone who did not keep in line was punished by having her soup and bread taken away the following day.²² On Sundays she sent the Jewish women to clean in place of the Poles whose job this was. "If there had been a crematorium there," claims Dora Sroka, "Joanna would have been the first stoker."²³

Following the war, Joanna was arrested after being identified by several Jewish women. According to information received from Matylda Woliniewska, she was released two months later by the Polish War Crimes Commission for lack of evidence. She later married the Jewish pianist Andrzej Szulc, with whom she tried to emigrate to Chile, but on the way, while in Paris, she was again recognized by a number of former prisoners and arrested. Frenchwomen, as well as Jews, testified against her, accusing her of brutality toward the Jewish women, greed, and extravagance. Her husband sought witnesses for the defense who would testify that she was appointed by the camp commandant and behaved commendably. The details of the trial are unavailable, but it concluded with Joanna's release, after which she and her husband settled in the United States.

The serious accusations voiced against Joanna are telling. Psychologists might claim that the fact that Joanna and the "Oberka" showed no desire to correct the negative impression they made attests to their sadistic nature and lack of rationality, that is, a concern for the future. Or perhaps it was the anticipation of German defeat that drove the "mistresses" to wield their power over the helpless slaves for as long as they could?

One thing is certain: Commandant Plaul was very pleased to have found the golden mean between two conflicting desires. On the one hand, he wished to keep a low profile

²⁰ *Journal*, p. 39.

²¹ For the term "ka-eltniks" see Chapter 3, note 5.

²² Testimony of Sonia Światłowska, Joanna Szumańska dossier, YV, M-21/4-89.

²³ Letter from Dora Sroka to The Committee of Liberated Jews in Munich, *ibid*.

*And with its passion it pierces the soul,
 Firing the young blood of one and all!
 Oh, my brothers who are free, listen to the song!*

*and grieving break,
 and shakes,
 ask to hear,
 sons here.
 owd,
 from a cloud,
 he clapped,
 mind had snapped!
 ondrous dance!
 me things of the past,
 owing in glee
 and they can suddenly see
 wonderful smell
 ove so well...
 all stand and stare
 Jewish girls here,
 rman pair
 watch the dancing there,
 his gun*

*To watch the dance that his heart has won.
 Oh, listen to her sing, despite the hunger and need
 She may be a slave, but she still is free!
 They can dance, these proud Russians can do,
 It's for them that the tanks are breaking through,
 Making the evil go up in flame,
 The red flags are flying in their name!
 They stand there merry, laughing, gay
 Holding their heads up high today,
 With strength and hope and faith in their eyes,
 "Oh, Russia, Russia, Russia, mine..."*

The differences in the treatment of the various groups put the lie to Commandant Plaul's solemn proclamations of "equality among all prisoners."²⁶ The disparities came to bear in a variety of areas, not all immediately apparent. Thus, for example, the Russians were the most closely guarded, and those who demanded to be recognized as prisoners of war were punished for the slightest infraction and assigned the most arduous work. As one of them testifies: "After refusing to work in the munitions factories while still in Ravensbrück, the commandant of the Leipzig camp warned us that we would have to work in the camp, and added: 'I'll make sure the conditions are such that you will get down on your knees and beg me to send you to the plant'. And he kept his word. We would be woken up at 2 in the morning. We had to bring vats of hot coffee into the camp. Then they would make us run to the construction site. We built a prisoner camp and buildings for the guards. The work was extremely hard and the quotas so high that we couldn't meet them... They quickmarched us to work in the storerooms, the laundry... every single day they rained punishments down on our heads."²⁷ Those who worked in the kitchen were somewhat more fortunate.

The Ukrainians were assigned to help the Russians in the kitchen, peeling vegetables and so on. In contrast to the harsh treatment of the Russians, the authorities tended to ignore breaches of discipline on the part of the Ukrainian women. As soon as a truck arrived with potatoes or turnips, the cry went up: "Olga! Marussia!" Within seconds, the Ukrainians would swarm out from every doorway and leap onto the truck with monkey-like agility. By the time the guard in the watchtower realized what was going on, they had already disappeared with the spoils.²⁸

The Czechs were the victims of cruel treatment, not only watched very closely but also subjected to frequent searches of their blocks by the SS overseers. Felicja Bannet claims this was justified, describing the Czechs as "masters of conspiracy. They were polite, but suspicious of foreigners. For them, every nook and cranny was an underground cell of the resistance movement."²⁹ The Slovaks had it somewhat easier, and the authorities were particularly tolerant toward the Frenchwomen. As for the

²⁶ See Plaul's welcoming speeches, Chapter 3, note 17.

²⁷ *Oni pobjedili smjert'*, Izdat. Polit. Literaturny, Moskva 1996, p. 182.

²⁸ *Journal*, p. 2.

²⁹ *Journal*, pp. 2-3.

general as strong men who were good with their hands and knew how to adapt to circumstances. They displayed a genuine national solidarity, and despised the Poles in particular. As for the Germans, "Stalin will slash their throats when he comes." In point of fact, they appeared to be overgrown children, a bit wild, easily excited, kind-hearted if you were able to get close to them, and grateful for any help. On the other hand, Rohmer was surprised by the hatred the Poles harbored equally for their neighbors both to the East and West and their unexpected hostility toward the French as well. He concludes that the Poles were not only arrogant, but also "people consumed by hate."³²

It is interesting to compare these comments with those of a Polish prisoner in the Leipzig camp, Irena Pelka-Seńko:

Everyone knew of the Polish-Soviet animosity, but it never overstepped the bounds dictated by prisoner solidarity against their captors. When it came down it to, we, the Polish women, did not have much reason to be overly fond of the Russian prisoners of war, after they had stabbed us in the back at the beginning of the war. Nevertheless - if I may digress for a personal note - it was a Russian prisoner of war who, in gratitude for the care given to a friend of hers who had the flu, came to our 'foreign Polish room' and brought me wildflowers she picked when she worked outside the camp. But the Russians also often and demonstrably sang a song that was very offensive to Polish ears: "We shall remember the atman bitches, we shall remember the Polish pans (masters)..." They also complained that only Poles worked in the infirmary and wanted at least one Russian nurse. But although we agreed, they didn't let any of them accept this post, probably out of fear of "treachery".³³

The Polish women accused the Russian prisoners of war of being excessively nationalistic, isolationist, and haughty. Relations between the Ukrainians and the Poles, whose countries had been hostile to one another for many years, were not much better. The Ukrainians felt extremely self-confident, even threatening the Poles: "We'll show you as soon as our boys get here."³⁴

³² Albert Rohmer, *La tragédie de la deportation*, pp. 224-225.

³³ Testimony of Irena Seńko. The expression "stabbed us in the back" is a reference to the Red Army's invasion of Eastern Poland after the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of August, 1939.

³⁴ Testimony of Jadwiga Węgrzecka; Barbara Natanson.

Skarżysko-Kamienna - the Radom, Majdanek, and Płaszów groups - continued to exist in Leipzig.

Distribution of Jewish Prisoners in Hasag-Leipzig

by Place of Origin

Place of Origin	No. of Prisoners	%
Radom District	254	21.2
Kraków	217	18.1
Warsaw	134	11.2
Łódź	65	5.4
Tarnów	44	3.7
Other	485	40.4
Total	1,199	100.0

The table above displays the composition of the transport of Jewish women in terms of where they came from. It shows that of these 1199 prisoners, some 60% came from towns in the Radom District (the "Radom Tier"), Kraków (the "Płaszów tier"), Warsaw (the "Majdanek Tier"), Łódź or Tarnów. The remaining 40% were from around 260 cities and towns throughout Poland. Moreover, some of them were originally from Berlin, Vienna, or Leningrad, and had been tossed by the vicissitudes of war into the Radom District or the camps of Majdanek and Płaszów, and from there to Skarżysko. The wide diversity of geographical and cultural backgrounds was, in fact, the primary cause of the internal division in this group. The Yiddish-speaking women from small towns, steeped in Jewish tradition and folklore, were known by those from the cities as "Mezryczki" ("provincials," from the name of the town of Mezrycz).³⁹ A large number of the women from Warsaw were former Bund members who championed Yiddish culture, and others came from assimilated families. The prisoners from Kraków became a dominant group among the Jewish inmates, as many of them were high-school graduates or university students well-versed in the Polish language and culture. They also included former members of the liberal Zionist youth movement Akiva, as well as a group of religious girls from the Beit Ya'akov movement.

³⁹ Testimony of Rina Cypres; Lillian Goldberg.

areas prevented these two groups from getting to know one another and developing any real relationship.

The Hungarian women also evidenced a range of different reactions to their new reality. Some, having experienced the horrors of Auschwitz and Ravensbrück, felt as if they had landed in paradise. According to Irma Neuman: "Here they didn't beat us, there were only 40 women in the barracks, each one had her own mattress, a small stove burned in the middle of the room... roll-calls were only seldom held outside, and they were generally conducted inside the barracks."⁴² A friend adds: "Treatment here was better and the food was normal, at least at first."⁴³ But there were also those who complained of frequent roll-calls, beatings, and particularly of over-crowding, because of which the women were only able to bathe once every three days.⁴⁴ There is no doubt that they had considerable difficulty adjusting, and often provided an excuse for a punitive muster.⁴⁵ "They were scared to death. Up to now they had lived in their own homes, and suddenly they had been thrown into hell."⁴⁶ The more sensitive prisoners sympathized with their plight, and Henryka Karmel dedicated one of her poems to them:

Oh, my brothers!

A dog-like terror in your eyes...

Helpless

Hopeless,

In fear you ask:

How can we survive like this?

Oh, my brothers!

Fear not.

Everything passes here,

Everything changes,

Soon, very soon

Your senses will dull...

Don't worry

⁴² Testimony of Irma Neuman, YV, 0-2/768.

⁴³ Testimony of Arnona Goldszmid, YV, 0-15/522; Arenka Bonat, YV, 0-15/1289.

⁴⁴ Testimony of Janona Pereny, YV, 0-15/506.

⁴⁵ Testimony of Regina Kalman, YV, M-1/E/2370/2445.

⁴⁶ *Neder*, p. 79.

Camaraderie and mutual kindness are very apparent in their quiet cultured block, while at the same time the untidiness of the block and the pallets is unsettling, and they themselves are usually uncombed and unkempt. Because of the lice, offensive remarks are frequently uttered, arousing hopeless protests... They are very pleased when they can speak French with a foreigner. They feel isolated, because few of the prisoners speak French well enough to carry on a comfortable conversation with them, and they themselves do not generally speak other languages. Only the Poles and a small number of Jews spoke French fluently.⁴⁹

There were also other women from the "Krakow intelligentsia" who visited the French block and received a warm welcome.⁵⁰ Lillian Lichtensztein describes her close relations with Lise London, "a wonderful woman," whose barracks she visited together with the *ka-elnyks* Anna, Danka, and Hanka. They told Lise of the terrible tragedies that had befallen their families and the *Erntefest* of November, 1943, when all the Jews of Majdanek were exterminated. Appalled, Lise and her companions tried to ease their suffering by displays of friendship.⁵¹

Ilona and Henryka Karmel also spoke French and participated in get-togethers enlivened by the melodious songs sung by the Frenchwomen. They immortalized these moments as well:

*Perhaps it was the charm of the unfamiliar song
Conveyed by the fair ladies of Paris here.
Or perhaps the haunting strains of the tango
Quavering in the memory of nights long gone.
But all of a sudden the prison walls fell
In an instant the Quartier Latin arose,
And the sun shone down on the pitch black night
And jasmine and lilac gave off their smell.
The breeze wafted like a poem through the trees in the fall
In the shade of the boulevards, gardens and parks.*

⁴⁹ *Journal*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Testimony of Felicja Karay; Helena Zorski.

⁵¹ Testimony of Lillian Goldberg; cf.: L. London, pp. 344-345.

status (the whole camp knew of their refusal to work in the munitions plants), and a sense of inferiority in comparison to the fighting Russian girls, a feeling tellingly reflected in Ilona Karmel's poem "The Dancer."⁵⁶ However, there are also references to anti-Semitism, complaints such as: "They always give us the thinnest soup."⁵⁷ This charge even found its way into a ditty passed around among the Jewish women:

*Tell me please, oh lady grand,
Why your eyes are blackly sleek,
Your hips so full, so red your cheek,
Yet so tight-fisted is your hand.
Why do you water down the soup
And raise your voice in a rousing whoop?
Your curls tucked under a cap of white,
But meat in the soup - a long forgotten sight!*⁵⁸

(Rena Taubenblatt)

Relations with the Ukrainian prisoners were of a very different nature. The Jews were all only too well aware that the Ukrainians had conducted pogroms against the Jews after World War I, repeating these actions a thousand times more brutally following the German occupation in 1941. "What the Bolshevik regime had erased from their memories, Hitlerism soon taught them. They beat us in the washroom, don't let us get to the faucets, shouting: 'Go away, dirty Jew!'...They take out all their anger for their suffering in the camp on the Jews, since after all, Nazi propaganda tags us as the cause of the war and of all the evil in the world."⁵⁹ These accusations aside, the *Journal* presents the Ukrainian women as hot-tempered, outstanding in their national solidarity and physical endurance, lending a helping hand to each other, and appearing as a united group, hostile to all other nationalities. It must be added that the women from Skarzysko had brought with them very harsh memories of the Ukrainian guards whose job it had been not only to secure the camp, but also to execute the groups of debilitated prisoners whose fate was sealed in selections.

⁵⁶ See note 24.

⁵⁷ Testimony of Sara Bojer; Halina Razowski.

⁵⁸ The song, authored by Rena Taubenblatt (Rina Fradkin), appears in her testimony.

⁵⁹ *Journal*, p. 3.

"that the Jews had grievances against us because we enjoyed better conditions."⁶⁶ She admits that "everyone was aware that of all the prisoners, the Jewish women suffered the hardest lot. They had the strain of the worst threat to their lives because of who they were."

What, then, were the possibilities for co-existence? "It was the same as in any population operating on the principle of a steam engine, compressed by force and always under pressure. To the dangers inside the camp were added the external dangers (a reference to the shelling - F.K.). Consequently, people behaved in different ways. There were individual, personal conflicts and group confrontations. There were instances of sacrifice, but also instances of ugly crudeness. In any case, I am unaware of any incidents of violent conflict between individuals or national groups."⁶⁷ This view is extremely generalized and makes no attempt to explain whether the accusation of universal Polish anti-Semitism has any basis in fact. There can be no doubt that a closer look will reveal a much more complex relationship between the Polish and Jewish prisoners. There was constant contact between the two groups, and because they shared a common language, it encompassed every aspect of life in the camp. Thus it would be unwise to reach a final conclusion before examining life within the walls.

⁶⁵ Testimony of Rina Cypres; Henia Strejski. See Chapter 4, note 13.

⁶⁶ Oral testimony obtained at a meeting in Warsaw on 26 June 1994; participating: Matylda Woliniowska, Irena Pelka-Seńko, Jadwiga Węgrzecka, Danuta Debek, Felicja Karay (herewith: Meeting).

⁶⁷ Testimony of Irena Seńko; cf. the testimony of Ester Netzer.

the camp) had arrived from Majdanek as a close-knit group with experience in organizing surreptitious operations and, most tellingly, ardent ideological motivation. As political prisoners who had been active in the underground, they considered their incarceration to be just punishment from the standpoint of the German enemy, as well as a stage in their own struggle. The members of the group, who gravitated around the dominant personality of Matylda Woliniewska, belonged to the intellectual elite and bore the badge of their offense with pride, something that can not be said of the hundreds of other Polish inmates.²

The Polish women from Majdanek (the "Majdaniarki") tried to use their connections and the support of the camp elder Joanna to secure assignments to the "better" jobs. This is evidenced by Irena Pełka, who was aged 19 at Leipzig. She originally worked in the plant, but when she complained to her friends of health problems, they had her transferred to the kitchen. When even this work turned out to be too strenuous for her, she approached the dentist Nieszczyńska, who arranged for her to work in the infirmary. Several of Irena's friends enjoyed similar good fortune. As a rule, however, the exploitation of "connections" of any sort did little to improve relations among the Poles. As in other camps, the "privileged" inmates had greater access to sources of food, the clothing stores, the infirmary - all those places that were crucial to survival. Thus, writes Irena Pełka- Seńko, "it was very easy to pass judgement on the functionaries in the camp, if only on the grounds that 'they have it better', 'they're so clean and well-groomed', 'they don't lift a finger'." Even Matylda is forced to admit that the functionaries were not very well-liked by the other Poles: "After all, they were the 'authorities' and the Poles don't like authority, or at least do not look on it favorably."³

It was against this background that a serious rift opened between the "productive sector" and the "administrative sector". The "ordinary" Poles who worked in the plant were often treated contemptuously by their compatriot "prominents," who tagged them with the highly pejorative nickname of "fabrykantka."⁴ This state of affairs was immortalized in a sketch written in the camp by one of the Polish inmates (the names of the characters are fictitious):

² For the incident of the peddlers, see Chapter Five, note 5.

³ Letter from M. Woliniewska, 19 April 1994, YV, 0-33/4237 (herewith: Letter from Matylda).

⁴ From the Polish for "factory."

and Jewish prisoners formed a sort of alliance against anti-Semitic and anti-Soviet manifestations on the part of the Poles. This was, clearly, not the atmosphere they would have wished to prevail in the last months of the war. The functionaries were undoubtedly aware of the danger: in relation to the other Poles, they had to maintain their connections with the "masses" and promote a sense of national solidarity. Yet because of the differences in mentality and education, their attitude to them was condescending. There were also the weighty considerations of their special privileges and the desire to take advantage of their position of authority for personal gain. Thus various factors operating consciously and subconsciously shaped the behavior of the functionaries toward the prisoners in general, and toward the Jewish women in particular.

II. From "Niunia" to "Kozunia"

"Wstawać! Panie cholery, wstawac! Madam Eugenia Godlewska, the *blokowa* of Block 20, kept shouting: "Get up! Rotten women! Get up!" She moved from bunk to bunk, hitting out right and left with the heavy board in her hand: Get up!"

The block lorded over by Madam Niunia, as her subjects called her, was the largest in the camp, with 600 Jews under her harsh rule. Ten women have already been singled out to go to the kitchen for the vats of "coffee," and another routine morning has begun:

"It's 4 a.m.!"

The women call.

Today this group and that

For the coffee will go.

And the chaos begins

As they run to the shower

For the water has power

To chase sleep away!

Here's the coffee! And the showers

Sztubowa Ada, sztubowa Hania,

Both so good at the chore !

So why, tell me why

Niunia's accusers is the author of the *Journal*, who describes her as coarse and vindictive.⁹ After the war it was rumored that Niunia was a Jew with Aryan papers, but Danuta Brzosko who knew her family, insisted this was not true.¹⁰

Niunia was not the only *blokowa* to gain immortality. Felicja Bannet devotes a section of her *Journal* to "Kozunia," who was apparently in charge of Block 19. Bannet prefaces her story with the remark: "The Poles were a separate issue, and one that is very sensitive for us, Polish Jews. I would not like their actual behavior to be distorted by the offenses and injustices perpetrated on us, and so will attempt to present only the facts in the most objective manner possible." She knows little of "Kozunia's" biography. Her first name was probably Maryla, but her family name is unknown. She is described as a short, slender blonde who had been an elementary school teacher in the region of Lvov before the war. She was incarcerated in Majdanek not as a political prisoner, but for trading in the black market. The *Journal* portrays "Kozunia's" bunk as the height of luxury, with a plethora of pillows, blankets, and clothes of all sorts which "her" Jews sewed and mended for her in exchange for a slice of bread or a ration of soup.¹¹

Where did these clothes come from? As we have noted, the women in the internal administration wore the same striped uniform ("pasiak") as the other prisoners (see fig. 14.). But unlike the rest, they also had additional clothes. The storeroom ("kamera") in the camp held clothing, shoes, bedlinen and so on that had been confiscated from the prisoners. Since most of the women came to Leipzig from other camps (Ravensbrück, Majdanek) where all their personal belongings had already been taken away, it may be assumed that most of the items in the kamera came from the Jews from Skarżysko, who still had some "civilian" clothes with them when they arrived.

All the inmates, particularly the Jews, wore a single tattered dress for months on end, washing it over and over again and trying to pretty it up in any way they could. Although it was strictly forbidden, the more quick-fingered women "organized," that is, stole, rubber aprons from the plant, shortening them and then fashioning belts from the remnants or selling them to other prisoners. Some succeeded in pilfering a few rags to

⁹ Testimony of Maria Lewinger; *Journal*, p. 38.

¹⁰ Letters from Henryka Karmel, 6 March 1980, private collection; Information from Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk.

¹¹ Testimony of Maryla Reich, Sara Shalem; *Journal*, p. 29.

Each *blokowa* was assisted by two women of the rank of *sztubowa*, and was entitled to choose two "cleaners" (*sprzątaczk*). After the day shift had left for work, the women from the night shift, who returned at 6 a.m., remained in the block. Officially, they could go to sleep, but this was generally an impossibility, since at this time the cleaning was done, directed by the shouting of the *blokowa* and her aides. This was not the only way to make the prisoners' life miserable. Whenever a consignment of clean underwear arrived, the "favored" women got the best items and the others had to make do with underpants that didn't fit.

There is a wide range of opinions in the testimonies regarding the lower ranking supervisors and policewomen, but none maintain that they beat the prisoners with rubber stanchions, as Lise London claims.¹⁵ On the contrary, Ester Netzer states unequivocally that the Polish supervisors treated them much better than the Jewish policemen in Skarzysko. According to Eda Fenik, Felicja Shahar, Ewa Cukier, and others, they do not all appear to have behaved in the same way. Some are mentioned only by first name, such as Dora and Marysia from Niunia's Block 20. Maryla Reich has some good things to say about Nuna Michalska, Wartarasiewicz, and Halina Kielar. Danuta Brzosko speaks of the good relations between the Jews and Helena Bujakowska, a policewoman (*Lagerschutz*) in the "Drugie Pole."¹⁶

The most popular functionary, however, was Zina Bragińska, assistant to Joanna, the camp elder. She was a middle-aged woman with dyed blonde hair, and was universally well-liked. Despite her high rank, no accusations were ever voiced against her. She was invariably ready to help. Indeed, she once arranged for one of the French women to meet with her father, incarcerated in the nearby men's camp, and even provided a loaf of bread so that the daughter would not greet her father empty-handed.¹⁷

"I always thought she must be Jewish," states Towa Zilberberg. Since she and her friends still had relatives in Majdanek, she once got up the courage to ask Zina if she knew the fate of that camp. She thus heard from her the horrifying news of the slaughter in November, 1943 of all the Jews at Majdanek.¹⁸ During the evacuation of Leipzig,

¹⁵ L. London. p. 329.

¹⁶ Letter from Danuta Brzosko, see Chapter Five, note 5.

¹⁷ Ibid.; see also: L. London, p. 353.

¹⁸ T. Zilberberg, p. 236.

everyday reality of the camp certain terms for coexistence between the Jewish prisoners and the women of other nationalities were created. While Bracha Bar-Ilan contends very pessimistically that "they couldn't stand us because we were Jewish," and the anti-Semitism reported even by prisoners of other nationalities could be seen in their support and approval of the vindictive treatment of the Jews by the anti-Semitic supervisors, the Jewish women in Leipzig were more spirited than before. They no longer accepted discriminatory practices without protest, and numerous fights and arguments flared up over this issue.²² It was perhaps because of this that coexistence was possible, a state whose features were lauded in the Hasag Anthem they sang loudly for all to hear:

*Hasag is our father,
The best father there is!
He promises us
Long years of happiness!
In Leipzig - a paradise on earth!
There's bread and butter, and salad green,
Luxury homes are where we live,
Four stories high - and the pallets are clean,
From Hasag we get toilets and showers right here,
And they give us the clothes of prisoners to wear!
Chorus: The commandant's for
Law and order, no more!
That we calm our nerves
Before we become
A can of preserves...
We have Joanna, a fine lady indeed,
Who treats us in a "model" way!
And Zina, a political prisoner too,
Who is nice to us each and every day.
The cooks - excellent women,
Such awful soup they make,
You'll never find potatoes there*

²² Testimony of Lilian Goldberg.

It wasn't so nice, however, to have to use this soap... What did the letters R.I.F.? They say they stand for "Rein jüdisches Fett"... No, that's not possible! But some girls are reluctant to use it.²⁵ They do their best to get hold of or even buy some other soap. But who can afford that? Here in the camp the prisoners do not even have any opportunity to earn some extra money. Some try. Oh, there's Hela Schächter! She's carrying two dresses, one is hers and the other belongs to her friend Helena Feig, a tall very skinny girl who doesn't have the strength to do laundry. Some industrious women wash a number of dresses in exchange for bread. The competition is fierce, particularly when it turned out that some of the Poles are also willing to pay a bowl of soup or a bread ration in exchange for laundry or tailoring and sewing jobs.²⁶

Every now and then a miracle happened. Genia Grosswirt and Rachel Wierzbicki had been in Majdanek and Skarzysko together, where Rachel, the older of the two, often helped Genia and even saved her skin a few times. Here in Leipzig they were lucky enough to run into a Polish friend from Majdanek, a woman named Stefa. At their very first meeting, Stefa told them about the slaughter of the Jews in Majdanek in November, 1943. She did a lot for Genia and Rachel, like getting hold of coupons and standing in line at the canteen to buy them things that were unavailable to the Jews, such as biscuits. Once she even bought them two flannel undershirts, a treasure that saved them from the perils of winter.²⁷ Stefa also taught them how to earn an extra food ration. From time to time, when Rachel was not on the night shift, Stefa would sneak the girls through the back door to the kitchen where they were put to work peeling vegetables. They were paid with a bowl of soup and a portion of bread. Sometimes they even managed to "organize" some turnips or other vegetables which they shared with their blockmates.²⁸

Others employed different means to improve their lot. Some, although it is impossible to tell how many, managed to smuggle a piece of jewelry or gold into Leipzig by swallowing it before they got on the train. Indeed, a number of Polish women noticed

²⁵ Testimony of Malka Hottner; *Neder*, p. 75. The letters R.I.F. on the soap stood for the National Office for the Supply of Industrial Oils - *Reichsstelle für industrielle Fettversorgung*. The claim that the Nazis produced soap from human fat has long been found to have no basis in truth. It was the misinterpretation of the letters to mean "*Rein Jüdisches Fett*" that gave it its bogus credibility.

²⁶ Testimonies of Eda Jewin; Helena Kurzman; *Journal*, p. 5.

²⁷ Genia Shechter, *Lost Youth*, (hebr.), Tel Aviv, 1996, pp. 107-109 (herewith: *Lost Youth*).

²⁸ *Lost Youth*, p. 108; oral testimony of Rachel Danziger.

*Each day in worse shape than the day before...*³¹

(Gela Meiersdorf)

Barter was common in all the Nazi camps and served numerous purposes. Thanks to this trade, Leipzig prisoners with a variety of skills were able to support themselves. Some made belts from rubber straps, others fashioned comb cases from bits of plastic or barrettes from wires (see fig. 16.). Most of the raw materials were pilfered, or "organized," from the plant. Barter helped the women to maintain a degree of personal hygiene, with some Jewish prisoners even willing to trade their bread ration for a handful of soap powder or a dense comb to help in the war against lice.

A number of women displayed considerable ingenuity. Lilian Lichtensztein tells of the "business" she and three of her friends conducted with the ladies from the *Schreibstube*. The foursome set up a "workshop" that fabricated slippers. For raw materials they used old blankets they "organized" in diverse ways and the cartons in which food rations were brought to the blocks. They cut the soles from several layers of carton glued together and covered them with blanket scraps. The tops were sewn from mesh cut out of old mattresses. The business partners were joined by a "*Mezryczka*" who skillfully embroidered the slippers using thread they got from the *Schreibstube*. The finished products were sold for bread, margarine, or jam.

Under the conditions of starvation in the camp, the most sought after commodity was naturally food. Where did it come from? Some women managed to put a little extra aside thanks to the help of free workers in the plant. The more fortunate ones had a friend assigned to the kitchen. But the primary source of food supplements were the supervisors charged with distributing rations to the prisoners. The routine theft of food by supervisors plagued prisoners in all camps, including Hasag-Leipzig. The *Journal* relates that a *blokowa* and her two assistants would take for themselves a considerable portion of the supplies intended for the inmates: margarine, sausage, jam, and especially bread. Whatever was left over was distributed to the "riffraff."³² There is no indication of which *blokowa* is being referred to here. Testimonies contain repeated complaints of hunger, particularly in the final months of the camp, but, with the exception of the

³¹ Collected poems of Gela Meiersdorf.

³² *Journal*, p. 18.

*Might things still change somehow?*³⁵

(Rena Taubenblatt)

This ditty generated a prompt response in the form of Gela Meiersdorf's "statement for the defense":

*What can you do?
Almost everyone here suffers starvation.
The biggest problem - doling out the soup ration.
So there is a special group,
Whose job is to always complain and protest,
That it's unfair the way they distribute the soup,
And that "certain women" are treated the best,
While less than their share get all the rest!
Some even say that the time has come
To tell the commandant what's being done!
But, dear ladies, please try to grasp
That control of the soup vat is a difficult task!
And when things are so hard for everyone
It's best to try to get along.
Rózka and Aśka also do what they can
To empty the vat to the very last drop
And fill our bowls up to the top.
So come on Jewish ladies all,
Let's give a cheer for our friends from the dining hall!*³⁶

(Gela Meiersdorf)

It can not really be said that this call for harmony was widely embraced. As hunger grew, so did dissension among the prisoners. There were more instances of the theft of bread in the Jewish blocks. Even women who had hid a piece of bread under their heads were astonished to discover it gone in the morning. Some even stole from their sisters or

³⁵ See note 12, "Na dwie kapomanki."

³⁶ Excerpts; from the collected poems of Gela Meiersdorf.

Another air raid siren. The overseer's harsh whistle. Panicking, we race to the shelters, modern cages, excellently equipped, pipes, fans, gas masks in the cupboards, walls and ceiling of reinforced concrete. The height of 20th century technology. It is a real pleasure to die in such luxury, so pampered! The overseers are so silly! They run around constantly from bunker to bunker counting us over and over again... 'Anyone who escapes during an air raid will be taken out and killed.' Idiots! Where would we go? Prisoners with no home, no family, remnants of human beings, survivors of the horrific storm...where would we go?...

The air raid is in full swing. 'Hallo Achtung, Achtung! (Attention, attention!).' There's a radio in the bunker, naturally! Reports of air battles interspersed with music. Such cynicism! 'There is fighting in the air over Hanover, Dresden and the surrounding area!' I strain my ears and my imagination goes to work: I hear huge explosions, thunder, noise and screaming - I see buildings collapsing on the people inside, ruins, parts of houses, stones and bodies flying through the air, flames. I can hear and see all this distinctly. 'Heavy shelling from the air over...' All accompanied by a gay, carefree foxtrot... And then again... Achtung, Achtung! I'm enjoying every minute...'⁴⁵

The prisoners welcomed the thunder of each bomb. Finally! Were they in danger? The women sat in the shelters with a jumble of thoughts going through their minds. Would a shell fall on them too...

*For five long years death has lain in wait for me,
Clever, treacherous, and wily.
And from its claws I have managed to run
Nor have I been found by a bullet from a German gun
Or carried on a train of death
To that unspeakable end.
So should I cringe at the engine's ring?*

⁴⁵ Testimony of Ela Margulies-Timberg, Margulies Collection.

Again there were a few days of quiet, again they went to work, again they returned to the camp, again they got their soup... If they could only hold out! Not falter! Not be sent away with the transport!

IV. The Terror of Selections

The first to go were the children, those who were newly born and those who were soon to come into the world.

There were very few pregnancies among the women from Majdanek and Ravensbrück, since those who had been pregnant had already given birth before being sent to Leipzig. When the Jewish prisoners from Skarzysko arrived, however, the authorities confronted a different situation. With no separation between the sexes at Skarzysko, there were several pregnant women on the transport,⁵⁰ as well as a number of children between the ages of 4 and 13. The list⁵¹ below contains the names of children who arrived in the camp alone or with their mothers. According to Zacharia Zweig, his daughter Sylvia was around 11 years old at the time, but the date of her birth was apparently falsified in order to make her appear older. Similarly, the date of birth of other children may not necessarily be accurate.

Children at the Hasag-Leipzig Camp

Name	Year of Birth	Place of Birth
Szajbe Henryk	1940	Koprzewnica
Lerman Wigdor	1939	Skarzysko
Frydberg Frajda	1939	Jędrzejów
Ajzenberg Szlame	1937	Skarzysko
Lerman Helena	1937	Skarzysko
Grzenis Halina	1936	Łódź
Florensztein Sala	1935	Łódź
Birman Rena	1932	Skarzysko
Weitz Edyta	1932	Leipzig
Blumel Genia	1931	Łódź
Feichler Henryka	1931	Kraków
Praskier Fela	1931	Łódź
Zweig Sylwia	1931	Kraków
Borowiec Zofia	1930	Warszawa
Frejlich Cela	1930	Radom
Thaler Rachela	1930	Kraków

⁵⁰ Testimonies of Genia Reiser; Eda Jewin; Fela Rapp, YV, 0-33/1803.

⁵¹ The list was compiled on the basis of the prisoner file, YV, JM/3963, 3964.

It is not clear whether this is also the transport referred to in the Auschwitz "*Kalendarium*," according to which 72 Jewish-Polish pregnant women and their children arrived from Hasag-Leipzig on 29 August 1944 and were all sent to the gas chambers.⁵⁵ There may have been more than one transport, as might be indicated by the discrepancy in the dates, or one of the entries (28.9.44 and 29.8.44) might contain a typing error. Whatever the case, such occurrences, mentioned in numerous testimonies, made it clear to the Leipzig prisoners that the danger of a death transport constantly hung over their heads even in this "paradise." Officially, it was invariably announced that the prisoners were being transferred to Ravensbrück, which accounts for the indication of this destination in the testimonies.⁵⁶ The victims were of two types: women selected during roll-call and the gravely ill taken from the *Revier*.⁵⁷

The selections were conducted by Commandant Plaul accompanied by several SS officers in the presence of the *Oberka* and Joanna. Prisoners whose exhausted or pale appearance might place them in jeopardy used makeup to try to put a "healthy" color in their cheeks. They bought lipstick and blush from the German women in the plant, and, according to the *Journal*, paid a very high price for them: three bread rations or three "fingers" of margarine. The makeup had to look natural; otherwise the commandant could detect it and beckon the unfortunate woman with the words "*Du aufgetackelte komm auch*" (You floozy, you come too). One woman caught red-handed putting on makeup was shot to death on the spot.⁵⁸

The numbers of the women who were chosen were recorded as "removed" (*abgestellte*), that is, unfit for work. "Until they were taken to the transport, they wandered around the blocks like ghosts. They were given smaller bread rations. Some cried in desperation, while others accepted their fate serenely, even trying to smile... Our total inability to influence our fate is so awful. The cars awaiting them stand on a railway spur, waiting for the locomotive. We pass those death trains on the way to work...."

⁵⁵ Danuta Czech, *Kalendarium*, p. 61.

⁵⁶ Testimonies of Sara Bojer, Fela Rapp; cf. *Neder*, p. 77.

⁵⁷ Testimony of Pola Goldweiss, YV, M-1/E/2113/1892.

⁵⁸ Testimony of Luna Kaufman.

Ukrainian: (rubbing her head) Don't whine, my head is killing me. The machine bangs away all night, and when I get back to the block, instead of lying down to rest I have to wait here for the doctor for hours...

Aide: What nonsense! You think I don't know what the plant is like? What are you complaining to me for? Do I force you to work? You don't want to work at the machine, tell them to give you a piano. What do I care!?

Jew: Ooh! Can I go in yet? I have such an annoying problem, I can't sit for very long. Right away I get dizzy.

Ukrainian: Go to hell with your problem! Look at her, damned louse house! She can't sit, but she can run around the blocks doing business. That doesn't make you dizzy?

Jew: What do you mean run around? What do you mean doing business?

Frenchwoman: Mesdames - donnez un peu place pour moi - je suis malade... j'ai fièvre.

Ukrainian: (making room) Pojaluysta, madame! (turning to the Jew) Ubiraysia k chortu!

The Polish doctor enters.

Doctor: Does everyone need dressings?

Belgian: (showing her the sick leg) Je suis malade, la jambe...

Doctor: What, what??? Tell me what's bothering you, quickly.

Frenchwoman: J'ai mal... (stretching out her hand) La main...

Doctor: Lajamb, laman... what a mess! Oh dear... - Ah... (seeing the Belgian's leg) - (to the aide) That's needs a dressing. (turning to the Frenchwoman with the sore hand)

Aide: (turning to the Frenchwoman harshly) Give me your hand... What are you hiding from? I said give me your hand!

Frenchwoman: A... J'ai mal...

Aide: Mal, mal... it hurts... you all make such a fuss over every little thing... it hurts. I'll stick my finger in and twist it around and you'll know what hurting means. (starts to dress the Frenchwoman's head - the patient resists)

Doctor B: Da, da... moshno segodnia, moshno zavtra... Yeah, yeah, maybe today, maybe tomorrow... You can never tell with the heart! So a transport now!?

All patients: What? A transport!?! (they all sing)

*Transport is the magic word - curing all pain,
And wounds, and burns, sending us running
Back to the plant again!
So we ignore our ills and we hide our pain,
Because, to go on a transport - oh you have to be insane!
So bravely we will suffer bunker, Revier, and lice,
Because a transport - oh my god - we're out of here in a trice!*

(All run off stage)

The threat of a selection and transport hung over everyone. Ewa Cukier mentions the Polish doctor (probably a reference to Dr. Maria Pilichowska, although this is not certain) who gave her a warning before one selection, thereby saving her life. She relates that the selection took place after the visit of the Hasag general manager, Paul Budin, who announced that he had no intention of paying for sick prisoners.⁶³ The life of Paula Gimes was saved by "her" supervisor.⁶⁴ Felicia Shahar describes a similar event:

Once I was very sick with an ear infection and I was in the hospital. I slept most of the time because of the fever... From time to time, the doctor touched me gently and affectionately. That hand was so loving, warm, and patient, like a mother's. It was the hand of a Polish doctor who took care of me in a manner we weren't used to in those terrible times. She kissed me, fed me, once even brought me an apple and called me 'daughter'. Her behavior toward me was astounding, almost frightening. I couldn't understand how, under those conditions, someone could be so good to me and so full of affection... One night, the doctor ran in and like a madwoman started dragging me out of bed and screaming: 'Get out of here, fast! Get dressed and go back to the block, you're well, go to work!' She shrieked hysterically, put my clothes on me, and sent me to the block. I was terribly disappointed. How was it possible that I

⁶³ Testimony of Ewa Cukier.

⁶⁴ Testimony of Paula Gimes;

a blue-eyed blonde). In the end, both the treatment she received and the doctor's behavior toward her were very good.

The prisoners also fell prey to death by natural causes. "They died so quietly, as if they weren't suffering at all, just asked me to hold their hand for a minute," Jadwiga Landowska remembers sadly.⁶⁸ Several younger girls contracted tuberculosis, among them the lovely Ela Bornstein from Łódź who had been a dancer.⁶⁹ Irena Pelka became very friendly with her, and describes her death several days before the liberation of the camp with profound grief. Death also took the youngster Kiri, and when the siren sounded, she was not even able to go down to the shelter without the help of Irena, who was always there to support her.⁷⁰

Some women who had been brought to the camp in the early stages of pregnancy had disregarded orders and not registered. Hanka Kurtz worked in the plant throughout her entire pregnancy, and was lucky enough to receive a great deal of help from her German manager.⁷¹ Fela Herling was able to hide her pregnancy for 8 months, but since she appeared to be plump and healthy, she was assigned the harder tasks. Until one morning a woman in her block went into labor. As a result, it was announced at roll-call that if all the pregnant Jewish women did not report, the entire block would suffer collective punishment and the offender would be hanged. Herling reported, and three weeks later gave birth to a son in the *Revier*. She was placed on a transport list, but the train could not be sent out because the front was now too close, and thus she was saved.⁷² The night before the camp was evacuated, Hanka Kurtz gave birth to a daughter, and both mother and child survived. The fate of the other woman who gave birth, named Mirka (last name unknown) is not known. At around the same time, Różka Millstein also had a child and remained in the camp after the evacuation thanks to a bribe the Polish prisoners gave to the SS overseer.⁷³ Two testimonies refer to the tragic case of an anonymous Jewish mother who killed her infant in order to avoid a transport.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Testimony of Jadwiga Landowska.

⁶⁹ Testimony of Eugenia Różycka, YV, 0-33/712.

⁷⁰ Testimony of Irena Seńko.

⁷¹ Testimony of Henryka Karmel.

⁷² Testimony of Fela Herling, YV, M-1/E/1987/1810.

⁷³ Oral testimony of Rachel Asa.

⁷⁴ Testimony of Jadwiga Landowska; L. London, p. 350.

Dr. Felicja Karay

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Rishon Leziyon, 14 January 2001

Dear Basia!

First- I am not a professor, only doctor.

Thank you very much for your fax! I will use all the letters, in different form, its very good for me.

I know that you have now much troubles with your friend and I hope he is OK after the operation, write me please, how is he.

We are OK, like an old people, here and here doctors, but it is a part of life. In Marz comes Einat with the family, it will be simche!

The matters with my book is not good. I get the negative answer from HAP, Mark Simon writes that "the company is in the process of being sold and it is almost impossible for us to recommend the preparation of contracts for new books." Now I must to look for an other editor. Perhaps your Holocaust Center an CHAIM can to propose something? To whom write about the book? We have not internet, perhaps CHAIM can make some publicity? I must know what are the costs of the edition (plus-minus) of the book with 250 pages, with pictures, and paperback, the redaction is ready and the index we can make at home. This knowledge is very important for me. Here in Israel, only I have sold 300 books, I hope that in USA or England I can help too.

Excuse me, Basia that you have troubles with my books too. How is al the family, send many best wishes and kisses from me and Hayim.

With love Fele

P.S. I want to prepare (from the English translation an article, to send it for editions, people etc.

Do you can to correct it?

JK

→

The answer send me with fax. But I do not see the number of your fax! Please send me!

CHAPTER SEVEN

MAN DOES NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE

I. After Work

Another week passed. The November days were getting shorter, heralding imminent winter. It was hard to stand for roll-call in the cold and the wind. It's good they got it over with fast today. Rena, Hela, and Malka have already showered. The bread and margarine they got for supper is a distant memory. They sit on Rena's fourth story pallet... What are we going to do tonight? It's too early to go to sleep; there's too much noise still. Rena is deep in thought. Maybe she's composing a new song? No, this time, perhaps out of boredom, she starts humming a familiar melody and Malka and Hela immediately join in.

*Es geht alles vorüber,
Es geht alles vorbei...
Melancholy day follows melancholy day,
Despair and tears are all they have to give,
Their anthem - endless labor,
And tomorrow - you may no longer live...
Each of us has weathered many storms,
So smiles you will not see here about,
But still you must believe, believe heart and soul
That over evil, happiness will win out.*

Why do they have to sing now? Anka is exhausted. She didn't feel well today and she wants to rest. But how can you sleep in this anthill? All that talking, shouting,

She had no choice. Sighing deeply, Anka climbed down from her third story bunk and went out to the corridor. She couldn't believe her eyes: inmates from all the neighboring blocks were crowded around, laughing and clapping their hands, and there in the middle... had they gone crazy?! A long line of women, each wearing a hat! They weren't of this world! They had everything there: feathers, flowers, birds, ribbons and chains, hats of every shape and color. There was a romantic turban with grapes on the side, over there a cardboard model of the Eiffel Tower, a tall Spanish comb adorned with black lace, a cage with a sleeping white bird inside... They were dancing a lighthearted "farandole" through the halls, now ringing with gaiety and singing...³

*Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrot,
Prête-moi ta plume, pour écrire un mot...*

They burst into the Polish block, snaking between the pallets as they sang:

*Ma chandelle est morte, je n'ai plus de feu
Ouvrez-moi la porte, pour l'amour de Dieu!...*

The whole camp was in an uproar: "Look at what that one's got on her head! It's a swan! It almost looks real!"; "Did you see Denise's hat? Like from the time of Louis XIV. Where on earth did she get all those colored ribbons?"; "Good Lord, we see them every day and they look so wretched, skinny, unwashed... and then all of a sudden, look what happened to them! What a hat can do for a woman! They look like pretty butterflies!" But where were the overseers? Had they all disappeared?

The SS overseers on duty that night had not disappeared at all. They were standing apart, as amazed as the prisoners, and... clapping like everyone else! Incredible, but that's the way it is: a woman is a woman... The gay "farandole" had wound through the Ukrainian block and was now on its way to visit the Russians. They were still singing:

*Sur le pont d'Avignon,
L'on y danse, l'on y danse...*

The patients in the *Revier* wanted to see it too, so the procession made its way to the top floor, bringing jollity and singing. The dancers came back downstairs and into the Jewish block, where nobody knew what the festivities were all about. Anna, who spoke French, hastened to explain: tomorrow, November 26th, was Ste. Catherine's day, *la fête*

³ *La farandole*, a French folkdance performed in a long line. Testimonies of Bina Herstein; Felicja Karay; L. London, p. 356.

"The Hat Parade" was a major event for the whole camp. The Frenchwomen, who up to now had kept to themselves, isolated, had earned universal affection. Felicja Bannet recalls that she had visited the French block a short time before and did not understand the meaning of the feverish activity going on there. "There was everything imaginable there! Flowers made from paper and rags, all sorts of little objects tastefully fashioned... figures carved from bread... it's no chance that France dictates haut couture! We learned here what that meant."⁶

The question of which national group was the first to initiate cultural activities was the subject of heated debate. The Poles claimed that as they had arrived before the others, they were the first to begin organizing performances.⁷ From the testimonies, however, a somewhat different conclusion can be drawn. Cultural activities were introduced simultaneously by the four large national groups: the Poles, French, Jews, and Russians, in mid-autumn, 1944 as part of the process of adjustment to a new reality. Despite the relatively good conditions at that time in the Leipzig camp, it took about two months for a prisoner to become acclimatized. The non-Jewish women who arrived from Majdanek or Ravensbrück had a hard time adapting to the totally unfamiliar work in the munitions factory. On the other hand, the Jewish women from Skarżysko for whom this aspect of camp life was not new, found it difficult to adjust to the international character of Leipzig, so utterly different from their previous experience.

It is possible to identify several typical features of cultural activity in the camp from its inception:

- It emerged in response to the challenge posed to the organizers by the prisoner population. "Despite the hunger, cold, and hard labor, the whole camp was thirsty for a word of comfort, although each national group organized activities only for itself."⁸
- The large majority of performances or gatherings were associated with religious or national holidays.
- Activities were of two kinds: the first everyday and spontaneous, and the second organized, initiated individually or collectively, and demanding planning and preparation.

⁶ *Journal*, p. 3.

⁷ *Matylda*, p. 56.

⁸ Testimony of Irena Senko, pp. 13-14; cf. H. Klein, "The Search for Identity and Meaning Among Holocaust Survivors," *The Nazi Concentration Camps*, Jerusalem, 1984, p. 428.

Krakow branch had produced Mosze Imber's outstanding choir, which had featured prominently in the "farewell concert" at Skarżysko singing their marvelous songs in Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish.¹⁰ Now the same songs were being sung within the walls of the Leipzig camp at an "Oneg Shabat" in honor of Rosh Hashanah:

*Kineret, Kineret, elayich,
Nimshekhet kol nefesh meaz...
(Kineret, Kineret, to you is drawn
Each soul since time long gone...)*

The women opened the program with sad songs of yearning, but on that Rosh Hashanah in 1944 in Leipzig, they shared a fervent desire to return to the days of happiness and memories of home:

*The Holy Days, the happy days of the past!
The days painted in red and autumn gold!
My tormented heart cries out for you,
Reawakened longing - hope for you we hold...
The Days of Awe with no fear! Days holy and pure,
Today I call to you, the prayer I sing!
Like on a silvery morn, in September mists,
The old rabbi's call to "slichot" did ring...
Days of a father's hand and a loving stroke,
Days of a magic tale that ended too soon...
Today I call to you in my yearning song
That with passion I will always croon.
Days of tears so pure in a holy calm,
How bitter the despair and the sigh of pain I feel!
May the mercy of forgiveness descend on me,
In these days of terror so real...
Slicha, slicha, slicha...¹¹*

(Henryka Karmel)

¹⁰ *Death Comes in Yellow*, pp. 221-222.

¹¹ H. Karmel, "W Rosz Haszana," *Spiew za drutami*, p. 26. "Slichot" is the name of the Jewish prayer for forgiveness that is recited during the days preceding Rosh Hashanah.

more precisely, embrace and weep. Everyone is crying. What can we possibly wish for ourselves? That next year we'll meet in freedom? We have no hope of seeing Hitler defeated; we don't even dare dream of it. Our *blokowa*, "Kozunia", watches all the emotion here in astonishment."¹⁵

A few friends gathered on Helena Brunnengraber's pallet to hear her poems. She wrote beautifully.¹⁶ Today they want something special in memory of their loved ones who are gone, the mother murdered in the ovens of Auschwitz or Treblinka or Belzec...

*I'll weep no more -
So I have promised myself.
Inside I lock my grieving heart, frozen like ice.
Two threatening fists I'll raise up to the sky.
Then my soul through the bars will fly,
And I will shout, so loud I'll shout,
That I am free, that no more tears will come out.
But for you, saintly one, I have buried some deep,
To fall on my knees at your ashes and weep,
Like a small child, to weep...*¹⁷

In Niunia's block, the women wished to greet the holiday in a special way. "That night was the only time we all got off our bunks and sang songs in Yiddish and Hebrew. This time our brutal *blokowa* Niunia didn't say anything or hit us."¹⁸ Late at night, when it seemed as if things had quieted down, they suddenly heard singing. "It was Dziunia Rebenstock. She had a beautiful soprano voice that filled the huge hall with the exquisite notes of the prayer."

They all held their breath as they listened, remembering their home, their family gathered around the holiday table, grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters... Here almost everyone was all alone. A ringing chorus of prayer resounded from every corner: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One!"¹⁹ There were no memorial

¹⁵ *Journal*, p. 23.

¹⁶ Henryka Karmel speaks of Helena Brunnengraber's poems in her testimony. Their fate is unknown.

¹⁷ "Mojej matce," *Pieśń ujdzie cało*, ed. by M.M. Borwicz, Warszawa, 1947, p. 273 (herewith: *Pieśń ujdzie cało*); the author's name is given mistakenly as Helena Blumengraber instead of Brunnengraber.

¹⁸ Testimony of Mala Hofnung - Sperling, YV, 0-33/4652.

¹⁹ Letter from S. Adler: see Chapter Four, note 19.

manager, and director of the group. According to one of its members, it was a "resistance group" whose aim was to strengthen the spirit of Polishness and patriotism and to promote the folklore. The performances were designed to help the population of prisoners bolster their faith, to raise morale, and to bring a little light and joy into the gray life of the camp... "We wanted to prove to the prisoners of other nationalities that we were... a part of a cultured and courageous nation."²³

Such challenges were Matylda's guiding light, but she added a number a practical aims as well. She regarded cultural activity as a means of preventing serious social clashes between the functionaries and the rank-and-file prisoners and helping the individual inmates maintain mental stability.²⁴ Moreover, there was a rumor circulated among the Polish women from the latest transport (arriving in September, 1944) that Matylda, so looked up to by the other prisoners, was a communist,²⁵ and although had no basis in fact, it could widen the rift between the "veterans" from Majdanek and the "new girls." And so, it was decided that the first "concert" would be held in honor of Polish Independence Day on November 11.²⁶ Joanna, the "camp elder," was invited to the first rehearsal in the hope that she would give her blessing to the enterprise. It was clear to Joanna, who knew Matylda from Majdanek and was well-aware of her extraordinary influence on the others, that by giving her approval she herself would gain status in the prisoners' eyes.

The performance was organized by an "executive committee" composed of "Majdanek women," including, in addition to Matylda, Maria Antoniewicz, Stefa B□o□ska, Jadwiga El□anowska, Maria Dworakowa, and Sabina □ukomska. Some of the younger women, such as Danuta Brzosko, were also among the 15 "performers." The program consisted of pieces from the works of the greatest Polish poets on the struggle against the country's occupiers, along with battle songs from every war. It concluded with concentration camp songs.²⁷

The first performance was meant only for Polish prisoners, but with the support of Joanna, which brought with it the cooperation of the entire internal administration, the

²³ R.Stramik, see Chapter Three, note 35, *ibid.*, p.75; cf. S. Demidowicz, "Związek pięciu stworzeń", Dla Ciebie Polsko, Olsztyn 1988, p.49.

²⁴ Letter from Matylda, see Chapter Six, note 3.

²⁵ *Matylda*, p. 76.

²⁶ Poland won its independence in 1918 following World War I after having been divided among Russia, Austria-Hungary and Germany for 123 years.

²⁷ *Matylda*, pp. 56-60; see also Letter from Matylda, note 24.

knew "*Lilie*" by heart and Fela recited "*Powrót taty*" (Father's Return). To end with, they all wallowed in sentimental tunes.³¹

Halina preferred the poems of Julian Tuwim, accompanied by gastronomic memories.³² Things were quite similar in Rena Taubenblatt's "salon," with the added interest of a new ditty about anything and everything in the camp. What could be more popular than recalling mama's culinary arts, and what, how, and when they used to eat! Hit songs about the spring and love were "revised" by Rena, and they could hear the familiar melody of "What a girl dreams of." What? Not of love this time...

What does a girl dream of

When she awakes at night

Her stomach growling yet...

What does she hope,

What does she think,

What does she dream to get?

The bowl of soup to eat,

The coffee hot and sweet,

The bread she'll clutch in her hand

*Better than the arms of a man...*³³

(Rena Taubenblatt)

The blokowa Wanda, looking for a way to enhance her reputation among her colleagues, decide to make use of Rena's talent for entertainment. One Sunday she invited a group of functionaries to the Jewish block, where Rena performed a program of "requests". She sang them all, the songs about the kitchen, the Revier, and more. The Hasag Anthem was received with the greatest delight, with the audience chiming in on the final lines. According to Rena, the guests could not stop laughing and did not take offense at all.

Serious literary evenings were generally held in the hall near the *Schreibstube*. They were organized by the Schächter sisters and other women from the Krakow group, and the audience gathered round them. The featured pieces were invariably poems by the Karmel sisters. All the Jewish prisoners were familiar with the girls and their mother,

³¹ Testimony of Felicja Shahr.

³² Testimony of Halina Razowski.

³³ Testimony of Rina Fradkin.

*You will survive, the whole world is yours,
 You will get through this hell, despite the pain,
 And you'll find your brothers and sisters again.
 Your life will be happy and gay!
 But when you are grown,
 Your mind may recall the days,
 When your friend 1123,
 Wiped your tears away,
 And comforted you in your grief.³⁷*

(Gela Meiersdorf)

The mood in the camp changed in December. There was excitement everywhere in anticipation of the Christmas holiday. It was whispered that the Frenchwomen were preparing "something special." The Poles were also getting ready for a grandiose Christmas show - the traditional *Szopka*. The pervasive atmosphere inevitably affected the Jews as well. The public performances staged by the French and the Poles had opened new possibilities for them too. Thus it was only natural for them to ask: What about us? We have a holiday too! Hanukkah! Maybe we ought to put on a show for the whole block?

The women from the Krakow group got together and decided to organize a public "concert" for Block 20. The first problem they had to overcome was, of course, the *blokowa*, Niunia. Would she give her permission? Niunia seems to have been persuaded that as it had already been done in other blocks, why not put her "realm" on the map as well. She had often enjoyed listening to the poems of the Karmel sisters. Once her permission was obtained, a date was set.

This was probably the show referred to by Danuta Brzosko, who speaks of seeing one in the "huge block" of the Jews. She claims that it was organized in response to the urgings of Matylda, with whom the writers and directors, the Karmel sisters, consulted.³⁸ Considerable "poetic license" seems to have been taken with this story, as according to Matylda's own journal, she met the Karmel sisters for the first time "the

³⁷ G. Meiersdorf, "Haneczce," *Pieśń ujdzie cało*, p. 275.

³⁸ *Matylda*, p. 77.

*Please listen, remember, and understand :
 Our fate is allied with the wanderer's staff
 A hundred times heavier than the bayonet.
 Hear and forgive us, no one is to blame
 Those who grabbed the staff - forgot their friends.
 For no uprising has come from bondage so harsh
 For so long our lives have had no end.*

Ester, a few years younger than Ilona, was struck by the fact that this was the first time in her life she had ever heard such an idea... Their slavery had gone on too long to give rise to rebellion. "But I understood that we had not always been a nation of wanderers and there were heroes in our history too! We had also had a land and a country once!"⁴¹

*Judah Maccabee Judah Maccabee!
 You fought the Temple doors to open.
 We must fight to rid our hearts
 Of rust and in your footsteps follow.
 We can not march ahead like you,
 For us no Book of Books, no miracle awaits
 Only the dull day and long road to redeem us
 And the fevered blood flowing through our veins.
 Each part of the road - like a page from the Book,
 A sacred letter - each and every stone.
 Each blow of the hammer like a flash of truth
 And the sound of the metal, the cry of the heart.
 Those who point the way there,
 In courage, in truth, go, follow the road
 Proudly - like a mallet in the blazing sun
 Like you to be - Judah Maccabee!*

The recitation resounded throughout the block. The women listened intently: "To be like you - Judah Maccabee." Could they? Would it ever come true and they could be in the Land of Israel?

⁴¹ Testimony of Ester Netzer.

acting and direction were extremely professional. Among the props they had managed to obtain were even a top hat and a silver platter. The whole "Bunkerkommando" was invited to the play, which earned rave reviews.⁴⁷

The Polish Christmas concert, the *Szopka*, was held in the large bunker, with enough room for over two thousand people. It now housed a stage, made of tables bound together with boards, costumes and props. Matylda had recruited a whole army of seamstresses, shoemakers, and painters to fabricate all the items they needed. They found old clothes in the camp storeroom, including Jewish capotes, red down quilts, and other "treasures" from which they made the stage set and costumes for all the actors. The plant was also a source of supply, providing pilfered cables, paper, paint, bits of aluminum, etc. To their credit it must be said that most of the women in the "Bunkerkommando," which boasted 70 members at its height, worked in the factory and only gathered in the shelter for rehearsals, under the energetic direction of "Mata" (as Matylda was called) and her assistants after 12 hours of backbreaking work and the evening roll-call.

Matylda's personality and influence can be deduced from an excerpt from the poem "Bunkerkommando" :

*At the head, of course, Matylda must go,
Quietly, calmly...through her glasses she peers
How vital it is that she always be there!
Why? Naturally, for the sake of the show!...
She wants us, in spite of the war
To be rid, for a while, of all of our woes,
So we don't think only of suffering and pain,
Why don't we put on a couple of shows!...*⁴⁸

(Maria Antoniewicz)

Folklore groups from all regions of Poland appeared in the *Szopka*, bringing imaginary gifts to Baby Jesus with their songs and dances. There were also groups representing the cities, such as Warsaw, Krakow and others, each appropriately costumed and presenting a patriotic text. There was nearly a catastrophe in the middle

⁴⁷ *Matylda*, p. 67; Letter from Matylda, *ibid*.

⁴⁸ "Bunkerkommando," writings of M. Woliniewska, YV, 0-33/4237.

came to see, and was so impressed by the Eiffel Tower that he ordered extra rations of bread and jam for the whole block as a reward.⁵²

Christmas arrived. The enormous bunker was again turned into a theater hall. Over 400 French and Belgian prisoners, as well as several hundred inmates of other nationalities, sat all mixed together on the floor. It was very hard for the "security services" to stop the flood of women pushing through the doors. The entire camp had been abuzz with talk of the French Christmas show, and everyone wanted to see it. The curtain went up. It began with a ballet performance entitled "Love Throughout the Generations," with appropriate costumes to represent each period. Next the choir came on stage, and the "men" and women danced. Each piece was applauded thunderously, with the audience roaring: "Encore, encore! You have to do it again!"

After the intermission came the play: an act from "Don Juan" by Molière. The inmates used a text smuggled to them by French prisoners of war employed in the plant. The audience had no idea that Dona Elvira's glittering gown was made from the silk lining of an old coat, and Don Juan's trousers from SS issue long johns stolen from the laundry line! The actors displayed extraordinary talent and vitality, "and if the great author could have risen from his grave, he would have been very moved to see his play performed that day in the cellar of a concentration camp...What a lesson in courage and friendship was learned that Christmas," wrote Odette Dugue, "and what a joy it was to see a smile on the exhausted faces, a smile of life, in spite of all the suffering!"⁵³

IV The Grand Concert

Among the enthusiastic audience at the French "concert" were members of the Jewish prisoners' Krakow group. Not only did the performance make a huge impression on them, but it also raised quite a few questions in their minds: How had they pulled it off? How had they made the incredible costumes and sets? "What's wrong with us Jews?" grumbled Maria Schächter, known as Mania. We put on our own shows at Skarzysko under much worse conditions, so why not here? There must be some of us just as talented as the French or the Poles! We have to do something, something special!⁵⁴

⁵² Testimonies of Luna Kaufman; Helena Zorski; Henryka Karmel.

⁵³ See note 51, pp. 210-211.

⁵⁴ Testimony of Maria Lewinger.

soon as the doors were opened, the first ten or twenty prisoners handed over the "entrance fee," and then the dam broke. The protests of the guards at the door were lost in the flood of prisoners pouring in. The Jewish women really could not complain, since the same thing had happened at the other shows. Everyone wanted to see it; everyone wanted to hear it! Especially something as big as this!

According to the testimony of Malka Zuckerbrot and Rut Kornblum, the commandant himself was invited, along with the overseers. The camp officers sat in the first row of the hall, the last inch of which was filled with thousands of prisoners crammed in. It was so packed that even Joanna could not push her way inside. It was time; on stage, the "emcee" appeared.⁵⁹ The five girls in the Alexander Jazz Band were in place, each decked out in evening clothes, i.e., a jacket, bow-tie, and black top hat, all made of the cardboard used to cover the windows in the black-out. The chorus line started its dance to the song:

Come on and hear...
Come on and hear...
For many many years and more
The great sounds of jazz reached our shore...
Sung by a cowboy under the skies,
Then westward to the cities arrived,
New York, Chicago, and from there -
To the old world here...⁶⁰

The huge crowd began swaying to the rhythm. This was music! It brought with it the spirit of the outside world, the spirit of freedom! The dancers linked arms, their hips swaying and their feet tapping to the wild beat:

Melodią tą kołysał jazz,
Wiał saksofonów smętny ton...
(The jazz thrilled us with its melody,
The saxophones blew to its lovely sounds...)

Thunderous applause. The next act was already forming on stage. This time in long white dresses with paper ornaments. Helena Schächter, who led the ballet corps, had

⁵⁹ No single description of the entire "concert" exists. The following is reconstructed from several testimonies.

⁶⁰ Testimony of Felicja Karay.

also made the costumes. The charming ballerinas twirled to the music of Strauss's waltzes sung by the choir. They left the stage to a riot of applause. Now it was the turn of Eda Millstein, covered in black shoe polish for her chimney sweep dance. It was no surprise that she was such a fine dancer; after all, she had been a dance instructor.⁶¹ She was followed by the second number by the Alexander Jazz Band, now singing "Rumba Negra." The "little black boy" danced and sang:

*Faraway in the jungle the village stands,
There the black man lives with Jimmy his son,
From a distant land a man once came,
And brought little Jimmy a saxophone!
But so short the night,
And so short the day,
When Jimmy on that
Saxophone does play!
Oh, Rumba negra, Rumba negra!*⁶²

The audience refused to let the dancers go: "Encore! Encore!" But the show must go on, and the main attraction was still to come: "The Adventures of Socrates in a Concentration Camp."⁶³ Frenzied activity on stage and the buzz of intermission in the hall. And again everyone fell silent. Before the drawn curtain, two characters appeared: Saint Peter, the gatekeeper of Heaven, and the Greek philosopher Socrates (played by Maria Schächter) dressed in a white sheet.

Socrates: Oh Saint Peter, save my soul!

The shouts of my wife I can no longer bear!

Peter: What are you talking about?

Socrates: Xanthippe! Can't you hear?

Always fights and bouts,

Complaints and shouts,

Hell would be easier to sustain,

Than up here with her to remain!

Peter: If your suffering is so hard,

⁶¹ Testimony of Eda Jewin.

⁶² The words are derived from the testimony of Rina Fradkin.

⁶³ The text of the play is derived from excerpts in the testimonies of M. Lewinger, R Fradkin, E. Netzer.

*You'll soon stand
In a penal roll-call too!*

(She shoves Socrates rudely)

Socrates: This behavior I can't grasp!

Why does she give my face a slap?!

(He sees a line of prisoners in front of the coffee vat. One of them is carrying a cup of coffee. He thinks it is a trophy.)

Socrates: Congratulations to the victor, glory, honor and more!

That is a trophy you are holding, for sure?

Prisoner: No, it's coffee, plain white coffee!

Socrates: White coffee? That must be

The nectar marking victory!

Might there be a few drops for me?

Prisoners: Stand in line, no tricks, you specimen

Before you feel a hand across your face again!

(Several overseers appear and push him into line)

Overseer: Get a move on, it's time to work to go,

Everyone in line, don't be so slow!

Keep in line, no talking too,

Or there'll be another penal roll-call for you.

Socrates: Where are you taking me, lovely Amazon?

Is Zeus to glory leading me on?

Chorus: Close your mouth, not another word say,

Or they'll throw you in the bunker right away!

Socrates: (Musing) To a pot of rotten stew

This country I'd compare,

Without the barbed wire fences

It wouldn't have a prayer!

They hold it tight

Just like the fear forlorn,

Hidden among the fences

That reveal the thorns!

They are like the jaws,

"The Clock" affected the mood of the audience. The atmosphere turned somber, as if everyone had suddenly remembered where they were. Fela Schächter came on stage to recite a new poem by Ilona Karmel, "Living Robots." The audience fell silent:

From the Oder to the Rhine - from Berlin to Vienna!
From the end of the earth to the edge of the world!
A new message shall ring out like thunder
Through the ether on the air and sea:
Living robots! Living robots!
A marvelous invention! The height of genius and simplicity!
Living robots! Raise your voice in rousing cheer!

There was no need to explain. It was clear she was talking about all of them, the slaves of Hasag! About the Jews, the Poles, the French - all of them! The audience sat frozen, gulping down each word. Chills ran down their backs; their hands clenched...

Hallo, hallo! Hallo, hallo!
Come closer! Gentlemen, just look!
A hundred percent profit! Clean! No joke!
The look of normal people they have got,
But have no fear! Human he's not!
Asks for nothing, doesn't cost a dime,
Just keeps working! Hard, and all the time!
Even twenty hours he'll work and no rest need,
With amazing dedication and at full speed!
For a spoonful of soup and a piece of black bread,
He'll keep working fast, full speed ahead!
Herr Kommandant, Herr Ingenieur,
Herr Direktor, Herr Werkführer!
For our plant - the golden age is here!
Hurray for the robots! Let's give them a cheer!

The words pierce the women's hearts... that's just what we are, isn't it? Day shift, night shift, backbreaking toil in stifling halls beside machines dripping hot grease. Every day we drag ourselves to work for miles, in the rain, heat, or frost. The damned

The room went wild. Hundreds of prisoners rose, cheering, applauding thunderously, weeping and shouting... Yes, we will be free, and we will show them, our "masters"!

An "astrologer" now came on stage carrying a large telescope. He pointed it at the sky and predicted what the coming year held for the various national groups, each represented by a couple performing an appropriate song. As soon as they started the Polish song "It's Time to Go Home" ("*Czas do domu, czas*"), the Polish inmates joined in spiritedly.⁶⁷ Then there was a number for the Frenchwoman. The Russians didn't give the performers a chance to present one for them, and instead began singing "Moskwa maja." Finally, on behalf of the Jews, the chorus sang "*Anu Olim Artza*" (We are Going to the Land of Israel)!

For the finale, all the performers gathered on stage for a rousing chorus:

O Nowy Roku z radością cię witamy!
Ty pewnie wolność dziś przynosisz nam!
 Oh New Year, a joyous greeting we sing!
 For us, freedom and liberty you bring!
For ever more, the bars of shame obliterate,
And before us open the prison gate!
Of camps and barbed wire we have had our fill,
From sorrow and despair our hearts are frozen still,
*But the grin of freedom our faces will illuminate!*⁶⁸

(Henryka Karmel)

The song ended and the clapping finally died down. Slowly, the crowd dispersed. Talking and shouting could still be heard along the long corridors. The women returned to the blocks as the supervisors attempted to restore some order to the camp. It would soon be curfew. But it was hard to stifle the excitement, and voices continued to come from the bunks late into the night. Who would have thought that the Jews were capable of organizing such a performance!

"As a result of that 'concert', we Jews gained a lot more prestige," writes Helena Kurzman. And Malka Hottner adds: "Anyone who was at that show will never forget

⁶⁷ Testimony of Rina Fradkin: letter from Shoshana Adler; see Chapter Four, note 19.

⁶⁸ The song appears in the testimony of Ester Netzer.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FREEDOM DRAWS NEAR

I. The Front Moves Closer

One evening, a small group of women was gathered around the table in a corner of the block. Ester Nessel and Fela Silberstein were there, along with a few others. On the table was a large sheet of paper covered with figures and letters. A tiny bowl had been readied. They were going to have a séance. It was time: "We put our fingers on the bowl, and when it started to move, we called on the spirits. There was Theodore Herzl, and then the late Polish leader Józef Piłsudski. We even called up the spirit of the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz. We asked them all the same question: When will the war be over? The bowl spun from letter to letter. We followed it with bated breath. And it always showed the same date: 8-9 May."¹ Other inmates looked for the answer in cards.

Some of the women really believed, some just played with the hope. But the shelling went on. There were nights when there was no point trying to get to sleep; twice they had to run back and forth to the shelters. By now, it was all merely part of camp routine, but there were also some surprises. Every now and then fliers were tossed from the planes.² Of course they were not allowed to pick them up, but sometimes they did. One was a pamphlet about Hitler's declaration: "Give me ten years and Germany will be unrecognizable!" How right he was! The flier contained a list of the German cities that had already been destroyed and occupied by the Allies. "Our hearts were filled with joy when we read the fliers. We knew now that the war was drawing to a close. But - would the Germans allow us to remain alive?"³

¹ Testimony of Ester Netzer.

² Testimony of Sara Fajszewicz, YV, M-1/E/1797/1655.

³ Testimony of Paulina Buchenholz.

*The sun will fade in distant mists,
 Fearful of the voices of vengeance so dread..
 And when the day comes for revenge
 The earth its turning will cease to perform,
 The sea will silence its echoing sighs,
 At the sight of the fury erupting like a storm!
 And when the day comes for revenge
 The universe will halt in place,
 Worse than death the terror then,
 Like a shofar the wind will rage
 When the day comes for revenge...⁶*

(Ilona Karmel)

Not all the prisoners were capable of comprehending the full significance of the apocalyptic picture. Those who gathered in less "sophisticated" circles, who were used to expressing their feelings in a more prosaic manner, sought solace in poets like Gela Meiersdorf, who articulated their hopes in her own inimical way:

*Maybe, God willing, there will come a day,
 When from this camp we are finally free
 And can live a life of freedom and liberty.
 Then to all we will tell
 Of the German brutality,
 How they beat us endlessly,
 How in the wind and storm and rain,
 We stood in roll-call hours on end,
 On our knees, they did command,
 And our hair shaved by their hand.
 Yet if we survive somehow,
 On all that we hold dear we vow,
 Our revenge on them will come,
 With no mercy, until it's done.⁷*

(Gela Meiersdorf)

⁶ I. Karmel, "A gdy nadzieją zemsty dni," *Śpiew za drutami*, p. 67.
 - Gela Meiersdorf, *Collected Poems*.

recalls Luna Kaufman. "We wanted to maintain the sense that we were cultured people whatever the cost, because the conditions we lived in were created to break our spirit. There was no way we could change the physical situation, so at least we fought for our souls."¹² Heated arguments sometimes broke out in the wake of school day memories: What good were all the lovely things the teachers taught us now?

*You taught us to look for ideals
In the words of the writers and poets,
To soar on the wings of poetry
And strive to plumb life's secrets.*

*With the word "humanus" you charmed our souls,
You commanded us kneel before the great-lofty-pearls!
Thus now it is so hard to bear our torment
Thus now I am helpless, alone in the world.*

*You should have rushed out in secret
To teach us how with both hands to grab life!
And to strike a sharp blow, right between the eyes
A blow to life - boldly to triumph!*

*To teach us to shout out loud, to be heard
To break through each barrier with the force of the flood,
To trample the others, so we won't be trampled,
To accustom our eyes to the terror of blood!*

*Why did you plant vain yearnings in our soul,
Oh, wise, learned teachers wherever you may be!
As you fostered the truth did you really not know,
There is no place in this world where humans can be?¹³*

(Henryka Karmel - Leipzig)

Had the women lost all belief in universal ideals? Now that these Jewish youngsters had had a taste of "real life" in the most appalling sense of the word, now that they were left with no family and no home and were forced to fight constantly just to survive for one more day, did they become cynical, did they lose forever any hope for a better world? Although it is hard to give a short answer to such a complex question, without a doubt, it would not be a simple yes. Without hearing one of the most popular poems

¹² Testimonies of Luna Kaufman; Felicja Karay.

¹³ Henryka Karmel, "To the Professors", in: F. Karay, *To Face Death Alone*, p. 36.

Forward march! The workers in front!
For on every corner in Germany
Is a Bastille, being torn down this very day!
With fists of steel on its gates we pound,
And shatter as well its barricades!
Forward march! Who is brave enough to lead the way
In holy frenzy, a frenzy so fine
To raise the flag "Fraternité, Egalité"!
And then all together, large and small,
Of marble and steel the building we'll raise
And engraved in gold for ever more:
The one and only, the eternal, "Fraternité"!¹⁵

(Ilona Karmel)

The commandant left without a word. "For several days afterward we were still afraid the incident would not end well. There was also the fear that someone would inform on us. It was said that if she recited poems about the Russians coming to liberate us, they would kill her for it."¹⁶ The poem does not appear in the collection entitled "Śpiew za drutami," but it has been preserved in several testimonies.¹⁷ Many years later, Felicja Shahar, who still remembered the occasion clearly, wrote to the reciter of the poem: "We saw you clenching your fists and we heard your loud voice... We were terrified! It was an act of supreme courage on your part!"¹⁸ To the reciter's great fortune, no one informed on her and no trouble ensued from the incident.

II Where is Home?

The days of March, 1945 passed slowly. Starvation was worse again. Although the younger women were the most severely afflicted, the older prisoners (35 and over) also showed clear signs of emaciation. Anna Hauser was barely able to walk. The petite figure of her friend Roza Bauminger was even tinier than usual. Henia and Ilona

¹⁵ I. Karmel, "To the German People". The poem can be found in the testimony of Ester Netzer.

¹⁶ Testimonies of Lea Muskatzenblut; Malka Hottner.

¹⁷ Testimonies of Ester Netzer; Felicja Shahar; Margulies Collection.

¹⁸ Letter from Felicja Shahar of 29 November 1992, private collection.

This simple, anonymous poem invariably triggered a debate over the painful question: If we live to see liberation, where will our home be? Opinions were divided, ideological differences that were reflected in the poems of the Karmel sisters. Ilona expressed faith in Zionism, believing her home to be linked with the eternal Jewish nation, despite assimilation:

*I have been won over by the mighty power
 Concealed in the chain of black letters,
 Seduced by the melodic sorrow of the prayer,
 And the divine majestic call of the shofar.
 I have been sworn for eternity by the glow of Sabbath candles,
 Commanded to defend and preserve them for evermore,
 For "your home is here!"
 I have been blinded by the brilliant white of the holy texts,
 Like the wind I soar as I recite the words:
 "Shema Yisrael!"
 I have been bewitched by the charms of the ancient prayer,
 Conquered by the legend of the Maccabees for all eternity,
 Like angels they surround me,
 Confound my steps and bind my thoughts,
 Like a wall they stand before my dreams...
 "Remember, your home is here!" - they call to me...²³*

(Ilona Karmel)

The "Zionist faction" included former members of the Akiva youth movement, representatives of nationalist religious Zionism led by Malka Hottner, former students of Beit Ya'akov, and quite a few assimilated Jews as well whose hopes of living a peaceful life in the Diaspora were crushed by the Holocaust. Nevertheless, many educated women had not yet found a solution to the question of identity. They had a profound appreciation for Polish literature and poetry on the one hand, and a dread of the anti-Semitism that put paid to any chance of social integration on the other. These mixed feelings are very aptly expressed in Henryka Karmel's poem "To Poland," which even the *blokowa* Niunia found moving:²⁴

²³ I. Karmel, "Mój dom," (excerpts), *Śpiew za drutami*, p. 58.

²⁴ Testimony of Felicja Karay.

when crates of rusty ammunition arrived at the plant, the German supervisor gave us rags to clean them with. Ilona also got a scrap of white cloth. Suddenly we saw her turn as pale as a ghost. She held the rag out to us and whispered, in shock: 'Girls, do you know what this is? It's a talith, look, you can still see the blood stains on it! Like the stains on my father's talith when they murdered him...' She didn't want to use it to clean the ammunition. And now we were listening to the story about her father, how he prayed on holidays, wrapped in his white talith."²⁹

The religious women tried their best not to eat unleavened bread during the Passover holiday. Towa Zilberberg traded her daily bread ration to a Polish prisoner in exchange for a small bag of rice, and "cooked" two spoonfuls each day in a can on the radiator.³⁰ Those who had no other way to celebrate the holiday, sang the famous "Slavery Tango": "Freedom calls, of freedom I dream."³¹ The time had not yet come for them to have to worry about going home...

III Expulsion from Paradise

In the early days of April, 1945, transports from other camps closer to the Eastern front began arriving in Leipzig. One held a group of women prisoners from Auschwitz that had been sent to Ravensbrück, from there to Malchow, and two months later to Leipzig. They were immediately put to work in the factory.³² To their surprise, they received substantial food rations and were treated well, unaware that the rations allotted the veteran prisoners had again been reduced.

The inmates were still being marched to the plant every day, where it was rumored that the city would be surrendered to the Allies without a fight and that the factories would continue to operate, and so the authorities pretended that work was proceeding at full swing. The labor itself no longer had any purpose; the only thing that mattered was to delay departure of the *Volkssturm* (civil guard) for the front for as long as possible...³³ The camp was pervaded by a mood of "the eleventh hour." It was said that the Americans were only 12 kilometers from Leipzig. Would they get there in time to

²⁹ Testimony of Malka Hottner.

³⁰ T. Zilberberg, p. 242.

³¹ "Niewolnicze tango," testimony of Felicja Blum.

³² Testimony of Margalit Gross, YV, 0-3/1761.

³³ Testimony of Halina Razowski.

stand for lack of sleep and nourishment. That night, the floodgates burst: hoards of prisoners descended on the food stores, breaking down the doors, screaming and fighting among themselves. Each one grabbed whatever she could find, seizing every last potato and beet, since there was no bread to be had. Chaos reigned. Neither the local police nor the SS officers could bring the rioting masses under control. The next day, a Friday, the entire camp was made to stand in a penal roll-call for two hours.

On the night of April 12, several men managed to escape from a nearby prison camp before its evacuation, reaching the *Drugie Pole* and sneaking into the women's camp where they were hidden by Polish inmates. Their whereabouts were known to only a very few. This escapade saved their lives, as the entire men's camp was burned to the ground after evacuation of the last 100 prisoners. It was not the only incident of this sort. The Germans locked 330 prisoners in a barracks in the Tekla camp in Leipzig before splashing it with benzene and setting fire to it. What were they planning for the women here? Several inmates reported seeing cables stretched around the camp. Would they blow them all up at the last minute?³⁸

The evacuation began on 13 April 1945. An extra bit of food was distributed, but things were still so chaotic that some women got double rations and others got none. They were given margarine and a spoonful of canned goods here and there. The lucky ones got bread. In the evening, the first groups were organized for departure. The evacuation was to take place in stages. The Jews were lined up separately in two groups.³⁹ The first group was sent out, with the second following some time later. The overseers scurried around to the very end, dragging out everyone they could find: Fast! Out! *Schneller!* It was no longer possible to make a precise count of each group of prisoners as they left.

They marched out of camp. "We passed the railroad tracks. Cars were standing there, looking empty. But were they? In the last selection they had again weeded out the sick and the debilitated. But the front was so near now that there was nowhere to send them. They had been left in the cars to freeze to death."⁴⁰ They walked on. Matylda was in one group of Poles, carrying on her body the whole of their "precious cargo": the texts of the "Bunkerkommando." Danuta Brzosko and most of the Polish

³⁸ Testimony of Irma Neuman; *Matylda*, p. 79.

³⁹ Testimony of Hela Beitner. YV, M-1/E/313/197.

⁴⁰ Testimony of Ewa Cukier.

destruction, hardly one building left intact, and here and there fires burning. Flanked by overseers and armed SS officers, the prisoners marched in rows of five, each wrapped in a blanket, constantly prodded to go faster, for the guards were afraid of an air raid - *Schneller!*

The dull thud of hundreds of wooden clogs broke the silence of the night. They were marching to an unknown destination, an unknown future. Expelled from Paradise to set out on their final path, on the march to freedom...

IV The Death March

I marched along with all the others. In a bag I held onto as tight as I could were all my possessions: a few lumps of margarine, a rag that served as a towel, a comb and hair pins I had made from wire. We walked. They led us down streets and roads and even forest paths. Rain mixed with snow began to fall. We had left Leipzig so long ago - how many days had we been walking? Three? Five? Ten? Kilometer after kilometer went by, and we had no idea where we were... I was terribly hungry and thirsty. It was worst at night. The cold pierced to our bones; our blankets had long ago become soaking wet. They kept changing the guards and making us go faster and faster, not letting up. They hardly gave us any time to sleep. We walked day and night. The girls dragged me along, because I would doze off as I walked... I dreamt there was suddenly a wall in front of me and I couldn't get through... It was horrible...

So it was for Malka Zuckerbrot, who only eight months before had sat on her pallet in a clean dress thrilled to be feasting on a thick slice of bread spread with salad... When was that? It felt like years ago. Now there was only rain, snow, sun, more rain, and walking, walking, walking. The SS overseers had taken off long ago, leaving the guards who fired on anyone who could no longer keep up. The way was lined with corpses, some of them male, that had been shoved into the ditches on the side of the road. A feeble dying man lay in one, and as they passed, an SS officer remarked: "Look at him. He's about to die and he might have been a free man tomorrow."⁴⁴

At first, each national group marched separately, then they were all mixed in together, and eventually were divided again. They covered about 30 kilometers a day.

⁴⁴ Testimony of Eda Jewin.

goods. But there wasn't enough food for all of us. We tried to light a fire, without waiting for permission this time. Again they started firing on us. Our departure from that place was punctuated by the groans of dying inmates..."⁴⁸

"We moved like sleepwalkers," relates Romualda Stramik. "We no longer noticed the corpses lining the road or the shots being fired. I barely dragged myself along on the edge of the group. In the first light I saw some young man lying in a ditch and a woman kneeling beside him and staring at him helplessly. Suddenly she let out a shriek: 'Is that you, my son?' The man raised his head and called: 'Mama!' and fell back again. I heard two shots. I got back in line and crawled along with the rest of the women... The Germans kept changing the direction we were walking in. They wanted to fall into English or American hands. They were terrified of the Russians."⁴⁹ Why didn't the SS simply kill all the prisoners? Romualda Stramik's contention that "they kept us walking in order to finish off as many as possible" seems unlikely. The real reason would seem to be much simpler. First of all, they were never given the order to kill them, and their ingrained discipline made it impossible for them to take on themselves the responsibility for such an action. Secondly, to the very last minute they remained fearful of being recruited to "defend the fatherland" against the Russians, and thus preferred to keep the prisoners alive. In the end, Plaul ordered the women divided up into smaller groups of 200-300, and sent each in a different direction. "From time to time, American planes circled overhead, and then the SS officers would conceal themselves among us, even putting on the prisoners' striped uniform."⁵⁰ Their attitude to the inmates never changed. They killed as many as they could. There was, however, an exception or two.

One of these was an old guard called "Dziadek" (grandpa) who kept assuring the women that the front was getting very near and they would soon be free.⁵¹ But the others were different. "It's hard to understand what made them guard us so closely, not taking their eyes off us even now, when they knew for certain what was really happening at the front."⁵² Tired and hungry themselves, the guards often begged food from houses along the way, but refused to allow the local population to feed the

⁴⁸ S. Demidowicz, "Ewakuacja", *Nadzieją była wolność*, p. 79.

⁴⁹ Romualda Stramik, *ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵⁰ See note 36, *ibid.*

⁵¹ Testimony of Felicja Blum.

⁵² Testimony of Henia Strelski, *We Remember*, p. 72.

"Behind the Great Curtains," composed after the Grand Concert, and some other texts.⁵⁶ The fire caught and Anna's life was saved. Human life was worth more than commemoration. How many died along the way? No one can say for sure. In some groups where 150 had started out, only 65 women were still alive two weeks later.⁵⁷

In April, 1945, thousands of prisoners from every camp were treading the German roads. The women from Leipzig encountered several groups of men no less emaciated and debilitated than they were. Miracles sometimes happened as well. On one occasion, Rut Kornblum and her friends halted not far from a small group of men when all of a sudden they heard one of them call out her name. Startled, she approached and was told by a prisoner she had never seen before that he had been in Mauthausen with her father, who had asked him to call out her name whenever he saw a Jewish woman. And imagine! He'd already found her! Rut wept with joy. Her father was alive! There was now more reason than ever to keep up the struggle to survive. Lola Adler was blessed with a similar miracle when she ran into a group of men from Gross Rosen and one of them brought greetings from her father.⁵⁸

And on they walked. Another day, another night. "We completely lost all sense of time. To this day I can't understand the mysterious power that kept us going. Was it the will to live that had become so deeply rooted in our hearts? Once when we were crawling alongside a dirt road, airplanes overhead tossed fliers on us. They said in several languages: 'Hold on, we will soon come to liberate you'.⁵⁹ But maybe they should follow the advice of one of the SS guards: "Try to escape when you get near the front!"⁶⁰ But who had the strength to run? And where would they go?

April was almost over. The first to take off were the SS officers. "One night we heard that the guards had run off," Halina relates. "The girls didn't know what to do. So we decided to split up from the rest of the group and set out on our own. There were six of us, including me, Wanda Blay and Stella Kestenbaum. When we saw a house, we went in and the Germans we met were very frightened. Nevertheless, they let us wash and gave us hot soup. But that night the head of the village came and declared that we couldn't stay there and would have to go to a refugee camp. On the

⁵⁶ Testimonies of Maria Lewinger; Eda Jewin; Felicja Karay.

⁵⁷ Testimony of Halina Schütz.

⁵⁸ Oral testimony of Lola Adler-Grinstein; *Neder*, p. 83.

⁵⁹ Testimony of Malka Hottner.

⁶⁰ Testimony of Irma Neuman.

locked the women in a barn somewhere, changed into civilian clothes, and took off. That was what happened, for example, to Malka Zuckerbrot and her friends. When they finally got the door open, they couldn't believe their eyes: the SS were gone? They were afraid to leave the barn until hunger got the better of them and they went out in search of food. A few German deserters passed and tossed them some dry bread. One of the women threw it back, shouting: "You have to save every crumb now; you're going to need it!" It was only in the early morning of April 23 that Russian soldiers appeared and gave them the first bread they had seen in two weeks.

In the chaotic conditions, each of the groups found itself in a different place on the day of liberation. Some of the fortunate ones got a bit of help from the local farmers in the form of food or old clothes.⁶⁵ A transit camp for refugees of all types was set up in the city of Oschatz, and some of the Jewish women went there for lack of any alternative. Matylda also found her way there with a group of other Poles. As they were doling out food, one German woman was heard to remark to another: "Look at the evil in the eyes of those women!"⁶⁶

The Schächter sisters were liberated near the village of Olganetz. "When the Americans came, they sent our group (which included Eda Lewin, Tamara Shapiro, and Hela Feig) to the house of the village elder, which turned out to be a villa with every comfort. The head of the village put us in the attic, because we were covered with lice. No one offered us fresh clothes or blankets. They brought us soup like cows, in buckets. We lay there like that for several days. When there were Americans around, we got salt in our soup. When they left, there was no salt. Everything changed when the Russians came. They kicked the head of the village out of his beautiful house and told us to stay there and rest. That's when we heard the great news: the war was over! We stayed in Olganetz for about a month, a period immortalized in a sketch by Maria Schächter called 'We Make a Little Occupation'. Her sister Hela made us all our first dresses from the curtains and bedcovers. We didn't go out looting the German houses with the Russian soldiers like other groups did."⁶⁷

Immediately after liberation, some quick-thinking women started searching for food, clothes, and even jewelry in the German houses, assisted by the Russians. "It was

⁶⁵ Testimony of Dora Bek, YV, M-1/E/348/270.

⁶⁶ See note 36, *ibid*.

⁶⁷ Testimonies of Maria Lewinger ; Eda Lewin; Felicja Karay.

The most critical problem of all, however, was: Where do we go now? What home do we have? The question appears repeatedly in one form or another in testimonies: "Liberation found us unprepared and helpless"; "No one was waiting for me and I had nowhere to go"; "I didn't know what to do with myself." The former Jewish prisoners of Leipzig chose one of three alternatives, as did other Jews: some returned to Poland to search for family members and remained there; others seized the first opportunity to go to the United States; and thousands were dispersed among the camps for displaced persons where they awaited the chance to immigrate to Palestine.

V Hasag's Final Days

What was the fate of the Hasag concern?

With the occupation of Eastern Germany by the Soviet Union and the inception of the new regime, the Office for a New Industrial Order (*Amt für Betriebsneuordnung*) was established in Leipzig in mid-1945. Three "commissary trustees" were appointed to manage Hasag property: Max Walther, Erich Beck, and Rudolf Oswald, with the latter two serving as commercial directors. According to the procedures initiated, all three were listed as official agents of the company in the Commercial Registry of Leipzig factories.⁷⁰

In view of these new circumstances, Max Walther, the head of the factory committee, wrote to the administrator of the Commercial Registry on 18 February 1946 requesting that he implement the following changes:

1. All previous members of the board of directors (including two more bank managers, Gruber and Jagman, in addition to the original five) were to be erased from the registry since "some can not be located and some are no longer entitled to occupy their positions after the transfer of the Hasag company to trusteeship (*Treuhandschaft*)."

2. The names of four managers were to be erased:

- * General Manager Paul Budin - missing as of 3 March 1945

- * Hans Fuehrer - arrested

⁷⁰ *Amt für Betriebsneuordnung*, Leipzig, 5 March 1946, Betreff.: Hugo Schneider AG, StAL, AG Leipzig, HRB. 169.

Kuhne was brought to trial in 1948 together 25 other Hasag managers from the Skarżysko factories.⁷⁵

In contrast, as far as we know, German managers of the Hasag Leipzig plant were never indicted for their brutal treatment of the prisoners. Similarly, neither Wolfgang Plaul nor the *Oberka* Käthe Heber and her various assistants, whose beatings remain etched in the memories of the survivors, never faced trial.

Many of the Hasag prisoners lived to see liberation and subsequently scattered throughout the world. A considerable number of them rebuilt their lives, with the past now only a dim distant memory. But not all were this fortunate.

*It was during the time when we were wandering from place to place on the death march. After one stormy night, one of the groups started trudging through the mud again. After an hour, we were given a few minutes to rest, because the women didn't have the strength to move. We sat down on the grass by the road, utterly exhausted. We couldn't see anything because of the mist in eyes we couldn't keep open... Suddenly German tanks appeared to one side of us. The panicking women tried to get up, to move... Three didn't make it. The tank rumbled over their bodies, leaving behind shredded human beings lying in a pool of blood.*⁷⁶

Those three were Mrs. Karmel and her daughters, Henryka and Ilona. Their mother was killed on the spot. Miraculously, the two girls survived. The tank took one of Henryka's legs and one of Ilona's.

The appalling news, which in mysterious ways spread like wildfire among the Leipzig prisoners, fell like a blow from above. Wherever they went, wherever they looked, the ghastly prophesy rang in their ears:

*Through the cities dead and the empty streets,
Like a raging storm, the hordes will stomp their feet,
Walking somberly, beaten, lost,
In the madness of the untamed, the madness of the saint,
Before the world they will stand - tens of thousands strong,*

⁷⁵ Kamienna Trial, YV, TR-10/7.

⁷⁶ Rena Taubenblatt, "Przed wyzwoleniem," *Dokumenty zbrodni i męczeństwa*, Kraków, 1945, p. 103.

CONCLUSION

Current Third Reich historiography is witnessing the renewed popularity of the "individualistic" school that places the blame for all the crimes of National Socialism on the shoulders of Hitler alone. This trend is apparent not only among German scholars, such as Sebastian Haffner, who regards Hitler as the prime enemy of the German people.¹ Even for non-German researchers like Allan Bullock, the idea that Hitler and Stalin are solely responsible for all the calamities of the 20th century is a comfortable thesis.²

Was Hitler also the enemy of the German concerns, ordered by him to increase their wealth? He did want property owners to "be stripped of independence and in a constant state of fear of worse things... to come."³ But reality was very different. With the declaration of the arming of Germany in the Four Year Plan (*Vierjahresplan*) in 1936, the government became dependent on heavy industry for the supply of military materiel, a dependency that grew even greater with the outbreak of the war. Factory owners could now seek to influence the rate and extent of munitions acquisitions to suit their own interests.⁴ Up until the very end of the Nazi regime, they also applied the policy of "business as usual" in regard to the recruitment of manpower. The success of their efforts is attested to not only by the 135 Aussenkommandos of Buchenwald in existence in March, 1945, but also, and primarily, by the rise in the value of German industrial shares during the war. The citizens of the Third Reich, who benefited from this situation by being spared the ordeals of inflation, lauded the Wehrmacht's victories and took full advantage of their fruits until the Allies started their campaign of heavy bombing. In their incredible "Teutonic arrogance," German scholars and the like, hoping to cleanse the German people of their contemptible past, deliberately attempt to

¹ Sebastian Haffner, *Rozważania o Hitlerze*, Warszawa, 1994, p. 117.

² Allan Bullock, *Hitler i Stalin*, Warszawa, 1994.

³ Herman Rauschning, *Sihot im Hitler*, (Gespräche mit Hitler), Hebrew, Tel Aviv, 1941, p. 140.

⁴ *Death Comes in Yellow*, pp. 13-16.

banking confidentiality will prevent curious researchers from uncovering its dark secrets from the time of the Nazis. Clearly, Dresdner Bank - like other German banks - can in no way be considered just another one of Hitler's helpless victims. On the contrary, it was an active accomplice in his crimes, not only cooperating in acts of thievery under the policy of "Aryanization," but also earning substantial profits from forced labor. Every Hasag prisoner knew what many distinguished scholars seem to "forget" today: "We provided the corporation owners with free manpower with which they earned huge profits."⁷

It was this fact that also determined the fate of the prisoners in the Hasag-Leipzig camp. The women did not choose to work in the munitions plants in exchange for a hot shower, the subject of one of their sarcastic ditties, but because they were terrorized in a variety of horrific ways. On the surface, it would appear that the terror tactics employed within the borders of Germany were somewhat less appalling than elsewhere, as vouched for by the testimony of numerous prisoners of all nationalities who report the fair treatment they received from their German supervisors in the factories. Without disregarding individual acts of kindness, however, there can be no doubt that the change for the better in the treatment of the inmates in general, and the Jewish women in particular, resulted from the German fear of the Allies' rapid advance. When it became apparent in April, 1945 that the camp would soon have to be evacuated, the managers hastened to take their leave from the inmates, begging to be remembered kindly.

This attempt to prepare an "alibi" in light of inevitable defeat was also behind Commandant Wolfgang Plaul's policy toward the prisoners. Only one year separated the "Jew hater" of Buchenwald from the "benevolent" commandant of Leipzig, surely too short a period to account for this metamorphosis without seeking an explanation in the imminent Allied victory and the likelihood of his being accused of war crimes. The same fear undoubtedly motivated the SS overseers, whose very function says something about their character.

As we have seen, Plaul promised equality among all the national groups in the camp, and seemingly maintained this policy in regard to the Jewish women as well. All prisoners were given the same food rations and were subject to the same roll-calls.

⁷ Testimony of Luna Kaufman.

between the groups on the collective level, rather individual spontaneous associations alone.

The absence of inter-group solidarity was also fostered by the unequal policies applied by the prisoner functionaries, who treated each of the national groups differently in their day-to-day dealings, if not on the official level. It is no chance that a large number of testimonies accuse the "Polish duchesses" of treating the Jews with contempt. On the other hand, there are very few complaints of deliberate cruelty. Even the women performing the most hateful functions tried, whether consciously or unconsciously, to find a golden mean and earn the approval of the prisoners.

Regarding relations between the Jews and the other national groups, several successful attempts to find a common language with the Frenchwomen stand out, while there were virtually no such links with the Russians or Ukrainians. As for the Poles, when I met with Matylda Woliniewska and several of her friends in Warsaw,¹⁰ I asked them why, despite their experiences in Majdanek, they made no move to form social contacts with Jews. Matylda confessed that in Leipzig, unlike Majdanek, she felt she was not needed, since all the prisoners were more or less in the same situation. Irena Pełka-Sejko offered a political explanation: they were deeply affected by reports of the behavior of the Jews toward the Poles under the Soviet occupation of Poland (the area of Eastern Poland in 1939-1941 - F.K.). She believed that most of the Poles in Leipzig held the popular opinion that some of the Jewish women might be communists, and that was why they refrained from initiating closer contact.

As a result of this situation of "to each her own," social life was also organized by each group individually, although it was necessarily influenced by identical factors: official policy; the absence of men; the amount of free time; and living conditions. To these can be added the "advantage" of experience. The uniform structure of all Nazi camps helped the prisoners adjust to life in Leipzig without undergoing the initial stage of shock, particularly given the fact that conditions were better here. The acclimatization of the Jewish inmates was also made easier because they continued to perform the same sort of tasks in the factory as in Skarżysko. Thus, for example, a woman sent to work with heavy machinery already knew what kind and how many cleaning rags she could ask the foreman for so as to "organize" a few for her personal

¹⁰ Meeting; see Chapter Five, note 66.

portions of which appear in this study), the Jews retained only a few bits of testimony, a small number of texts, and primarily - poems.

Nonetheless, all existing sources help to create a broad diverse picture of cultural activity in the Leipzig camp. Several reasons account for its flourishing here. First are the "liberal" policies of the commandant, who seems to have believed that at that moment in time, on the eve of defeat, songs and recitations could serve as a most effective outlet to ensure quiet and ease tension in the camp. Secondly, the prisoners had tacit approval, and even a certain degree of assistance, from the internal administration. Moreover, the extent of cultural activity was unquestionably affected by the practices and experience the inmates brought with them from their previous camps, as exemplified by the Poles from Majdanek and the Jews from Skarżysko. A final significant incentive seems to have been the element of competition, both among the different nationalities and among the participants themselves, who enjoyed the status of celebrities.

Produced under similar conditions of crowding, terror, and the need to operate surreptitiously, cultural activity in Leipzig took the same forms as in all other camps. These included reminiscences, stories and recitations from world and camp literature, lessons, solo and community singing, plays and "concerts," dancing, occasional exhibitions, and religious activity. The most common, and most meaningful, form was camp literature of all types: journals, sketches, feuilletons, narratives, nostalgic poems, religious laments, descriptions of events, songs of revenge, and lyrics satirizing the functionaries and camp life. All of these were produced by the Jewish prisoners, but only a small part of them are presented here. Most were lost on the death march.

Each national group had its own individual aims and contents. Although the Poles also performed satirical sketches and religious plays, their shows were predominated by a national-folk-historical element. It was their goal to prove to the other groups that "they belonged to a proud nation with a rich culture and were not sub-human".¹³ Such an attitude was in no way apparent among the French, who viewed their activities as a means of strengthening their bonds of friendship and raising their spirits. They performed Molière and historical ballets in the supreme confidence that their entire audience would be familiar with the pieces since they represented French culture! From

¹³ R. Stramik, see Chapter Seven, note 23.

From a broader perspective it can be said that cultural activity in general, both active and passive, played a major role not only in preserving the sanity of the prisoner and preventing her from becoming nothing more than a "guinea pig." It also served as the single bridge between the different national groups. Its most significant aspect was the opportunity it offered to resurrect, if only for a short while, the human values that were excised from the Nazi camps: compassion, brotherhood, mutual respect.

"What was most important," writes Kazimierz Szewenberg, a former prisoner of Auschwitz, "is that the expressions of 'camp culture' strengthened the ties, linking the prisoners of different nationalities, reinforcing the basis of their solidarity. It is no chance that every cultural activity, regardless of the prisoners' nationalities, won the support and defense of the others (sometimes in the form of a piece of bread offered the artist). On deeper consideration, if the attempt to force on the individual in the extermination camp the state of a vagrant in a cultural void was a failure - such an attempt will never succeed."¹⁵

Some might say: but Leipzig wasn't an extermination camp! True, the prisoners here were given coupons to use in the empty canteen instead of simply dying slowly of starvation, they were slapped instead of being kicked by jackboots, whipped instead of being bound to instruments of torture, wore stripes instead of gray, stood in punitive roll-calls instead of being sent directly to the gas chambers, were sent away on "transports" instead of to the crematorium, got hot showers instead of gas chambers! Here they were the slaves of Hasag and not the enemies of the Third Reich. Why did they enjoy such "benefits"? Because defeat was just around the corner, because the "masters" were scared. Yet despite this fear, they were still made to undergo expulsion from paradise to purgatory - the death march...

"Today people can no longer comprehend what we went through. Those responsible are trying to hide the facts and obliterate them. Their descendants will have neither the imagination, the knowledge, nor the desire to reconstruct for themselves the picture of the events of that past time" (Hans Magnus Enzensberger).¹⁶ Will that happen to us too?

¹⁵ Z. Jagoda, S. Kłodziński, J. Masłowski, *Oświęcim nieznany*, Kraków, 1981, p. 134.

¹⁶ Z. Kałużyński, "Ząbki systemu," *Polityka*, 17 June 1995, p. 16.

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(The name in parentheses was the women's name in the camp and is the one usually used in the text.)

P= Polish prisoner

1.	Albirt Sara	M-1/E/2210/2072
2.	Asa (Gerber) Rachel	Oral testimony
3.	Baner Tema	M-1/E/325/228
4.	Bar-Ilan (Siegel) Bracha	0-33/4839
5.	Beitner Hela	M-1/E/313/197
6.	Bek Dora	M-1/E/348/270
7.	Bernat Aranka	0-15/1289
8.	Blezowska Ester	M-1/E/1628/1516
9.	Blum (Blatt) Felicja	0-33/1839
10.	Bojer (Wolf) Sara	0-33/3268
11.	Buchenholz (Schneider) Paulina	0-33/E/142-2-1
12.	Buszmicz (Kelberg) Ida	0-3/2798
13.	Cukier Ewa	0-3/1664
14.	Cypres (Wander) Rena	0-33/1857
15.	Danziger (Wierzbicki) Rachel	Oral testimony
16.	Debek Danuta (P)	Oral testimony
17.	Eitan Miriam	0-33/2834
18.	Ezer (Brandwejn) Hanka	0-33/3420
19.	Fajszewicz Sara	M-1/E/1797/1655
20.	Faranyi Janona	0-15/506
21.	Fenik Eda	0-3/1272
22.	Fradkin Rina (Taubenblatt Rena)	0-16/249
23.	Fugiel (Kolecka) Zofia (P)	0-33/4838
24.	Gimes Paula	0-3/1080
25.	Goldberg (Lichtensztejn) Lilian	0-33/4837
26.	Goldszmid Arnona	0-15/566
27.	Goldweiss Pola	M-1/E/2113/1892
28.	Granatsztajn (Finkler) Malka	0-3/3323

61.	Reibtscheid Barbara	0-16/1911
62.	Reich (Perlberg) Maryla (in the	
63.	Reiser (Grünberg) Genia	0-33/3485
64.	Rozenblum Sabina	0-3/3572
65.	Razowski (Zuckerman) Halina	0-33/3287
66.	Schütz Halina	0-16/329
67.	Seńko (Pełka) Irena (P)	0-33/4242
68.	Shahar (Silberstein) Felicja	0-33/3334
69.	Shalem (Iwańska) Sara	0-33/3332
70.	Siegman (Brand) Frania	0-3/2979
71.	Sperling (Hofnung) Mala	0-33/4652
72.	Sroka Dora	M-21/4-89
73.	Stern (Rosental) Sara	Oral testimony
74.	Strelnski (Buchman) Henia	0-33/1836
75.	Szymkiewicz Ester	M-1/E/1210/1276
76.	Światłowska Sonia	M-21/4-89
77.	Todtleben Teresa (P)	Oral testimony
78.	Węgrzycka (Lipska) Jadwiga (P)	0-33/4240
79.	Witosz Fela	M-1/E/2487/2568
80.	Wolański (Szkłanka) Hanka	0-3/1174
81.	Wolfe (Karmel) Henryka	0-33/1852
82.	Woliniewska Matylda (P)	0-33/4237
83.	Zelwer (Horn) Roza	0-3/1074
84.	Zorski (Schächter) Helena	0-33/1797
85.	Zweig Zacharia	0-3/2192
86.	Żychlinski Hanna	M-21/1-16/MAPPE/16

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- 2 Page from the 1943 *Handbook of Public German Companies* referring to Hasag-Leipzig (*Handbuch der deutsche Aktiengesellschaften*, 1943, B. 5, STAL)
- 3 Map of the Buchenwald Camp "Outside Squads"
Hasag camps are underlined.
(*Buchenwald. Mahnung und Verpflichtung*, Frankfurt a/Main, 1960)
- 4 Letter from Armaments Minister Speer to Paul Budin of 30 November 1944 expressing Hitler's appreciation and gratitude for Hasag's achievements
(BA R 3/1574/B1.89)
- 5 Page from the list of SS Overseers Assigned to the Hasag-Leipzig Camp
(Clothing Allotment)
(THA, NS, 4Bu, Vlg. 99)
- 6 Coupon for the Leipzig Camp Canteen
(private collection)
- 7 Felicja Bannet's Personal Prisoner Card
(YV, BU (B) 51)
- 8 Budin
- 9 Odezwa Budina
- 10 A Poem by Henryka Karmel Written on a Department SZii 2 Work Card
(Margolis Collection, YV, 0-48/473-3)
- 11 Wolfgang Plaul
Commandant of Hasag-leipzig
- 12 Portion of a Letter from Buchenwald Headquarters to Hasag-Leipzig Regarding SS Overseers' Missing Items of Clothing
(THA, NS 4 Bu, Vlg. 99, p. 47)
- 13 Pages from Felicja Bannet *ScheRler's* Journal
(yv, 0-33/4096)
- 14 The Striped Dress ("pasiak") of Prisoner no. 648
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